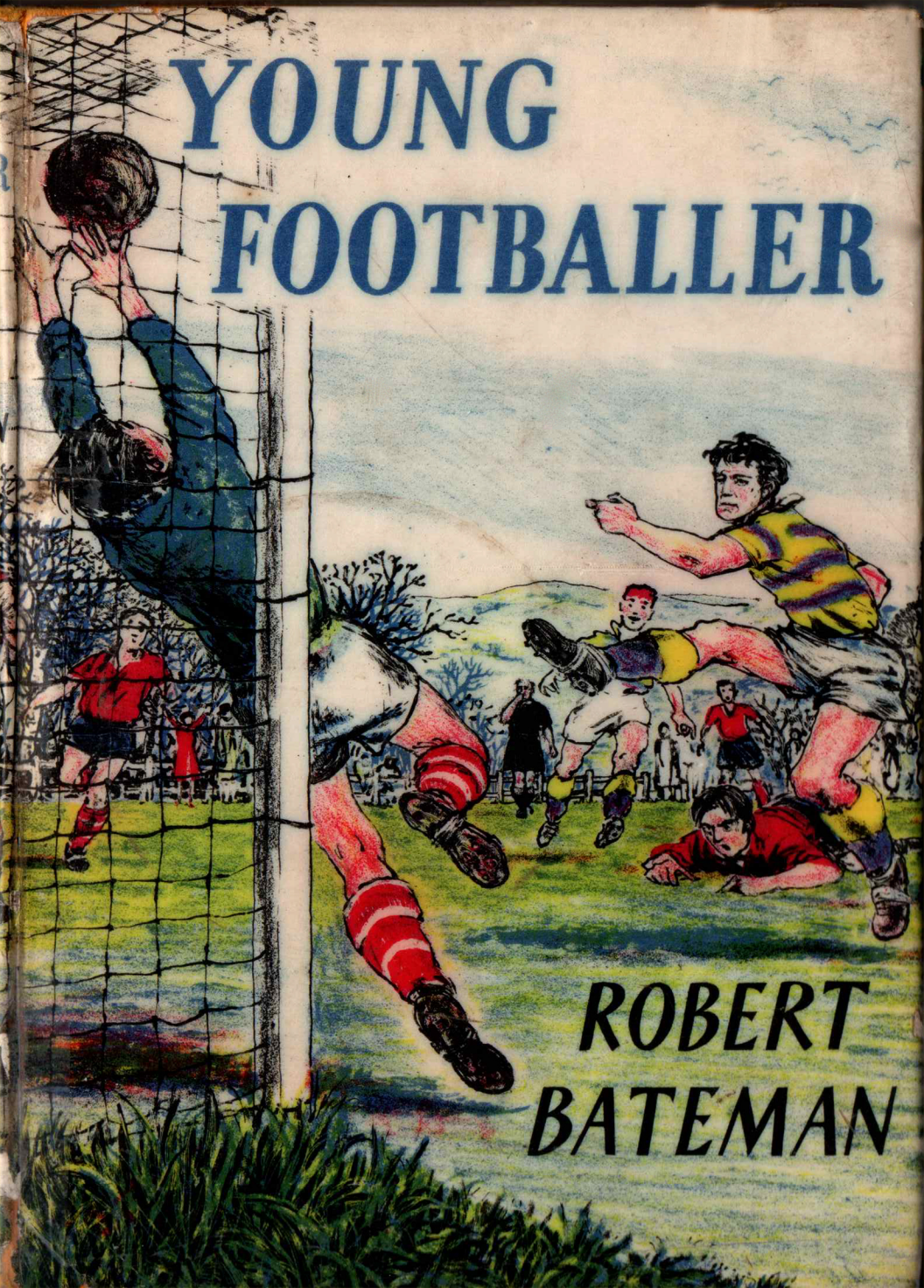
YOUNG FOOTBALLER



ROBERT BATEMAN

YOUNG FOOTBALLER

by ROBERT BATEMAN

The local junior football team has gone completely to pieces and is threatened with dismissal from the league; the old players fall away through lack of enthusiasm, with the exception of Tom Faraday who is determined that the club shall be saved. He is faced with a formidable task. Debts have mounted up, the pitch is taken away from the boys by an angry farmer because the rent is long overdue and, worst of all, there is no one to play in the team. But Tom Faraday has a sturdy determination and a willing helper in Mary, the sister of one of the renegade players. Together they call a meeting of local boys who, though at first sight seem a hopelessly motley selection of players, ultimately show that strength of purpose can go a long way to compensate for lack of skill. And there are several dark horses among the recruits – the queer spindly-legged Hon. Joe and Stevie Smith who has never before played football while wearing his glasses. How the Woodside Comets make their own pitch, raise money to pay off the debts and how, through the jealous treachery of a rival team, they have to cope with eleventh-hour disaster, makes a story that is both realistic and exciting. And there is a surprise, too, after the final match is over, for Tom whose whole outlook is bound up in football.

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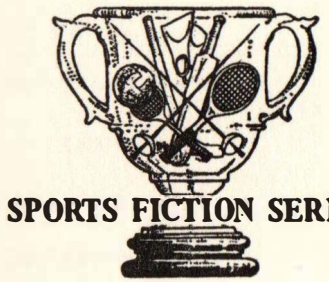
YOUNG FOOTBALLER

ROBERT BATEMAN



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YOUNG FOOTBALLER

Chapter One

THE COLLAPSE

I FLUNG UP my hands in despair.

The Chalkly Arrows' forward line was sweeping down towards our goal for the seventh time that afternoon, and we weren't doing a thing to stop them. Harry Naughton was making a feeble attempt to get back in time, but the goalkeeper was standing midway between the posts, gaping at the attackers and making no move at all to do anything about it.

Now don't get the idea that goalkeeper was ignorant. He knew what to do—he knew he must rush out and block the scoring shot, try if need be to lift the ball off the foot of the man who made it. The only reasons Charlie Maggs didn't do anything about it were that he was out of training, and that he didn't care.

That was what maddened me. None of them cared! The score was already six–nil against us, but you'd have thought we were ten goals in front.

My name's Tommy Faraday, by the way. This was my second season as inside-left for Woodside Comets—and it looked as though it was going to be my last. We didn't have a Boys' Club in Woodside, but the soccer team had been running for years, and running quite well. Then, suddenly everything had gone wrong.

I suppose it started when we had a run of bad luck at the start of last season. We lost eight matches in a row, but it wasn't because of poor form or lack of training. It was that autumn when nearly everybody had Asian flu. Remember? Well, we had it worse and more often than anybody else, and half the time it was as much as we could do to put an eleven on the field.

That started the rot which led, in the space of exactly one year, to the match against Chalkly Arrows, and the chorus of barracking from the few people who'd come to watch.

It wasn't a game, it was a massacre. I was running back as hard as I could, but there was no hope of getting as far as the goalmouth before the Chalkly forwards. Their attack swept along with a series of perfect passes—though why they bothered to pass, I've no idea. Nobody seemed to be tackling them. There was only one man between them and the goalpost now, and that was Charlie Maggs, scratching his jersey with one hand and holding the other out in a daft kind of way like King Canute ordering the tide to go back.

King Canute had no luck, and nor did Charlie. The ball sailed past him into the back of the net, and all he did was make a sort of feeble hop across the goalmouth—in the wrong direction.

That made it seven–nil. And what made it even worse was that beyond the goalposts, heading across a ploughed field towards us, was J. McTurk Stewart.

I'd better explain how the sight of J. McTurk Stewart sent my heart into my boots. He was the local farmer

who rented us the field. And I knew perfectly well what he wanted—the rent for the past two seasons. He'd been kept quiet by promises. They were promises we'd honestly meant to keep. But failure spreads like tea-stains on a tablecloth, and the club membership had dropped from thirty to twelve in only a few months. Any hope of collecting the rent by raising everyone's subscriptions would have come unstuck. "It's called the Law of Diminishing Returns," explained Harry Naughton's sister Mary. She was club secretary. "The more you put up the price, the fewer people can afford to pay it."

But it was no use trying to explain the Law of Diminishing Returns to J. McTurk Stewart! He stood there on the touchline, glowering.

We went back up to midfield. The centre-forward pushed the ball to me, and I tried a quick move past the opposing inside-right, then nipped round the right half-back by pretending I was going to pass across to the opposite wing.

That left me with the full-back, centre-half and the goalie to beat, but not much time left before the Chalkly half-back would be in position again. I looked across our ragged forward line, searching for anyone ready to take a pass.

I think it was then that I lost my temper. This was the one last chance of getting a goal before the final whistle—but there wasn't a man in sight. A glance over my shoulder showed me the four of them, miles behind, plodding along as if they were on a ten-mile jog-trot. Not one of them was looking at the ball.

I did the only thing possible; tried a tremendous, angry, hopeless long-shot at goal. It had all the force of five years as an inside-forward, plus five seconds' blinding fury. It sailed high over the heads of the oncoming defenders, and hit the cross-bar with a resounding thump as the final whistle blew.

And it was not only the end of the match. The Chalkly Arrows didn't even stop to say good-bye. Disgusted, they ran to their bikes, changed their shoes, and pedalled off homewards. I didn't blame them. The referee went, too. We were left, eleven of us, standing in the middle of the field on a raw September afternoon.

No, not eleven. I was forgetting J. McTurk Stewart. He came marching down towards us in Norfolk jacket, plus-fours, and a deerstalker hat, with a curved pipe in his mouth, looking like a well-fed Sherlock Holmes. His hand was already out before he reached us.

"Five pounds five shillings!" he demanded, his little beady eyes blinking. "And I want no more excuses."

Two or three of the team began to slide away, but he spotted them and shouted, "Come back here, you boys. You're all in this. You owe me five guineas for two years' rent, and there'll be no sloping off like that until it's paid."

There was a deathly silence. Knowing Harry Naughton and his sister, I also knew just how much cash there was in the kitty. It was seven and fourpence. Maybe a whip round among the eleven of us might have produced another ten bob, but that didn't make five guineas.

It was Harry who spoke up. "We've had a bit of trouble getting the money together," he said, avoiding J. McTurk

Stewart's eyes. He stood with one foot on the ball, spinning it round slowly. "But don't worry, Mr. Stewart," he went on hurriedly. "We'll pay up as soon as we've got it."

J. McTurk Stewart put both hands on his hips and snorted. "That's exactly what I was told last year," he bellowed, as if we were a hundred yards away. "I don't believe your promises any more. I've been generous about this field, boys, but I can't go on being generous for ever. Can you boys pay?"

There was a pause, then Harry slowly shook his head.

"Then you'd better get those goal-posts and nets down by tomorrow night, and find yourselves somewhere else to play." He looked round the eleven of us as we stood there shivering with cold. "Though judging by what I saw this afternoon, d'you know what I'd do? Eh? *I just wouldn't bother!*"

That was all J. McTurk Stewart said. He turned round sharply, whistled to his dogs, and marched away with his head held high and looking a bit like a triumphant army general in one of those old pictures called "After the Battle", or "His Moment of Victory".

But it was our moment of defeat! I looked round the circle of ten faces, expecting to see in them a reflection of what I felt myself—despair.

And to my astonishment it wasn't there! They looked bored, that was all.

If I'd been angry before, it was nothing to the way I felt now. "Well?" I bellowed. "What about it? Are we going to lose our field or are we going to do something about it?

We've got to make money, and make it quickly. And while we're about it, we've got to . . ."

I stopped, because something heavy had been dropped into my arms. Harry Naughton had dashed over to the edge of the field and pulled out of his bicycle-bag the cash-book, records, bills and accounts of the Woodside Comets. "There you are!" he said, laughing. "*You* do it. You can have the lot!"

I looked down at the volume in which were all the results of past seasons' matches, and the lists of members past and present. And by the time I'd decided what to do, I no longer had an audience. The last few bikes were disappearing round a bend in the lane, and I was on my own.

I *was* the Woodside Comets—club, team, and unpaid-for field.

I felt bitter about it.

But I also felt the first faint stirring of excitement which comes to anyone facing a challenge—that is, anyone as stubborn, obstinate, and pig-headed as I am!

Chapter Two

DISCUSSING A MUCK-UP

IT WASN'T UNTIL I was sitting on the hearthrug in front of the fire in the evening that I got to grips with the problem. And even then, at first I could do nothing but stare into the flames, with the record-books on my knees, seeing nothing but ten bored faces—the faces of a team which wasn't a team any longer. The glue had run out of the seams.

What could I do, on my own? I'd never tried to organize anything in my life. I'd always left that to somebody else with an older—or at least a wiser—head than mine. I know where my brains are. They're in my boots, where I'll need them most if ever I get into League soccer. Some people just aren't made for planning or working out profits and losses. I'd always thought I was one of them.

Now it seemed all that thinking had to be done over again. There was no dodging it; if the Woodside Comets were to be revived, there was no one to do it but me.

It was a pity I'd never been any good at Maths. It had always been just a lot of squiggles on paper to me, and whenever I was faced with one of those problems about six men buying seventeen herrings at eightpence-half-

penny a pound, I'd always sat staring at it for half an hour —and always failed to find the answer!

The Maths master said the same thing over and over again. "These aren't just problems *on paper*, Tom! They're real life problems. They may not come up in terms of herrings, but you'll find them sooner or later, in saving up for holidays, or buying a bike by instalments, or working out your weekly budget when you grow up. If you don't learn how to work out problems *now*, you'll find it a lot harder later on."

How right he'd been!

That brought me back to the record-books spread out across my knees. Just how much *did* the Comets owe? On a slip of paper I worked it out, and then sat back and blinked at the total. Boy, we weren't just in trouble over J. McTurk Stewart's field—we were in trouble in all directions with a large T. There was a bill of nearly two pounds for equipment, and another bill headed "Miscellaneous small accounts settled by H. Naughton" amounting to more than another pound. Then there were two instalments owing to the second-hand dealer from whom we'd bought the contraption for marking out the pitch. Altogether the debts came to over ten pounds.

Now ten pounds is a lot of money. At least it certainly is to me. Dad's no millionaire. In a good week maybe he brings back nine pounds from his job with the coal firm at the station. I know that figure's about right, because for more years than I can remember he's been dinning it into me that this is what he calls "An Age of Opportunity", and that I should work harder at school so I'll be able to

be something brilliant later on. It's no use arguing with Dad; he just doesn't realize that if I've got any intelligence at all, it's from the ankles downwards. "Soccer?" he says. "You don't want to bother with that, Tom. Sure, play it when you want to—but don't waste your life on it."

I've never had any reply I could make to that.

Ten pounds! With a debt like that, no players, no field, and a fixture list to meet for the rest of the season, it looked as though I'd inherited a hopeless muck-up. Maybe I was a fool even to think of saving Woodside Comets. Selling up the goal-posts, netting, two match-balls and a couple of practice ones ought to settle the bills, and then the club could just die quietly and be forgotten.

It was then that the doorbell rang. Dad was out, so I stumped along the passage in my socks (I'd been toasting my feet at the fire) and opened the door about two inches.

"Hello, Tommy!"

It was Harry Naughton's sister, Mary. The way I felt at that moment, any relative of Harry Naughton's was no friend of mine, though I'd met Mary once or twice at parties and she'd always seemed okay. But then so had Harry. I couldn't think why on earth she was on our doorstep with an umbrella over her head to keep off the pelting rain.

"Can I come in?" she said hesitantly.

"Why, sure you can, Mary." I opened the door wider, my eyes goggling. Maybe she'd come round to see Dad about a coal delivery, but it didn't seem likely unless the office down by the station had closed early.

"Tom, I've just heard about the club! It's awful! Harry doesn't seem to care—all he does is laugh and say how funny you looked standing there with your arms full of books."

"That Harry . . . sorry. I know he's your brother, but honestly, I didn't think *he'd* run out on the club."

"Nor did I." Mary shivered, and folded up the umbrella. "I told him what I thought of him—and the others." She looked round; saw the reflection of the firelight through the open door. "I say, can I come in properly and get warm?"

I'm no great shakes as a host. Probably I went a bit red in the face. "Of course, Mary," I stammered. "Come on, let's get your mac off. Put the brolly over there in the hall-stand. Are your feet wet?"

"Mmm. These shoes leak."

"Well, if you don't mind toasting your toes in front of an open fire, I don't. I've been doing that for the past half-hour. You go on in and sit down; I'll put the kettle on for a cup of tea."

I went out to the kitchen. There was an old football lying in the corner beside the vegetable rack. I picked it up and bounced it two or three times. That was what the future looked like—soccer limited to bouncing a ball on my own, or cycling over to neighbouring towns and villages to watch other teams play.

Some people I've met don't seem to mind standing on the touch-line watching others do the running about. They're lucky. I'm not made that way. Either I play, or I go home. If I stand around watching, every minute or so

somebody has to pull me back because I've started to edge over the line towards the ball.

I heard Mary call out to me while I was filling the kettle. "Hey, Tom, is that right—about the club owing ten pounds?"

"'Fraid so. I was just reckoning up how much we could get for the goal-posts and things."

There was a scuffle of running feet, and Mary's head appeared round the door. "Don't say *you're* going to give up, too!" she said scornfully. "In that case you can switch off that kettle. I'll put my shoes on and go home—I didn't come here to waste my time."

"I don't want to give up, Mary. But what can I do single-handed? I don't know anything about organizing."

"You honestly mean that? You'd keep the club going if you could?"

"Gosh, Mary—don't you realize that if the club goes under, I'm sunk with it? It means I've got to go about seven miles away and join Chalkly Arrows if I'm to get any soccer at all. How can I practise if it means a fourteen-mile bike-ride every time?"

I thought for a moment, and added, "Another thing. This club's been running for years. It has a good record. Hang it, Mary, it's not just a record, it's almost a tradition in Woodside. Is that all to be lost just because we hit a bad patch? I won't sell up—I'll fight." I scratched my head. "I don't quite know how, but it's worth a try."

Mary came into the kitchen, grinning. "Then let's get started. While we're having that cup of tea we can make a start on the membership list."

"We?"

"You don't want to tackle this all by yourself, do you? It's not just that I feel I've got to because Harry let you down. I *want* to help. My two older brothers played for the Comets before they went into the Army." She closed her eyes and screwed up her face. "Phew! You watch what happens to Harry when they get home. They were crazy about the Comets."

I carried the teapot and a couple of hefty mugs into the other room. Maybe Mary was accustomed to egg-shell china, but Dad and I weren't used to visitors. We drank our tea out of half-pint mugs because we liked it that way.

Mary took hers gratefully and warmed both hands on it. Then she opened up the records of the Woodside Comets.

"D'you realize the club once had its own bank account, with more than thirty pounds in it?"

"That's past history," I said grimly. "What are we going to do about this ten?"

"How many members are left?"

"Well, I dunno. Judging by the way they walked off this afternoon, I'd say only one. And that's me."

"And me! I'm a non-playing member, don't forget."

"That makes four bob a month in subscriptions!"

"D'you think any of the others would rejoin?"

I shook my head. "They'd been grumbling for weeks. Several of them didn't want to bother turning out for this afternoon's game. Nobody cared a hoot how badly we were beaten." I felt myself getting angry again, and con-

trolled myself with difficulty. "Maybe Charlie Maggs might give it another try. But I doubt it."

"Then where do we get players?"

"I'm blessed if I know. Unless . . ." And then suddenly a lunatic idea flashed through my head. "Unless we do something quite crazy. I've just had a daft notion . . . it probably wouldn't work."

Mary sat forward eagerly. "Let's hear it anyway."

"How many boys are there in Woodside who don't play soccer?"

"I don't know, off-hand. I suppose there must be a dozen or so. But they're no use. You can't teach them in a fortnight."

"I don't expect to, Mary. I think they *can* play, and that the only reason they don't is that nobody's ever asked them. Take Archie Mulloy. He looks tough enough, but nobody's ever asked him just because he's Dr. Mulloy's son and he doesn't go to our school or mix with our crowd. Then young Steve Smith. He's been left out because he wears glasses. But I once saw him watching a match, and he kicked the ball back for us with a wallop that would bust a goal-net."

"Yes, and what about the Corrigan twins?"

"Oh, no, Mary. Not those two. They're a couple of really wet kids. They'd run a mile if they saw a soccer ball."

"That's all you know! Those two climbed Ben Nevis on their holidays last summer. They may look a bit weedy, but they've got muscles like steel rope. And they must have played soccer somewhere."

"And there's Bert Appleby. Nobody's ever asked him because he's always busy working for his old man, on the farm. But it's worth trying." I stood up; suddenly I was so wildly optimistic it was impossible to sit still. "Mary, what we've got to do is have a meeting."

"That'll take time!"

"It mustn't take time. It's got to be tonight, so we can get enough people together to take down the goal-posts tomorrow. If we don't do that, old Turkey Stewart'll pull them down himself and make 'em into fence-posts!"

Mary got to her feet. "I can phone Archie and the Corrigans from home. Can you get Steve Smith and Bert Appleby?"

I was already half-way into my gumboots. "Let's arrange to meet here in an hour from now. If anybody can't turn up, just ask him if he'll join. But let's try to get them all here. There's a lot of talking needs to be done tonight if the Comets are to be saved!"

Chapter Three

COUNCIL OF WAR

"WHAT'S ALL THIS about?" It was Bert Appleby, fourteen years old, five feet eight inches tall, and as strong as a team of oxen.

"I'll explain when the rest of them get here."

"It had better be good. I've a harrow in the barn waiting to be mended, and the eggs to collect."

"Tom's come into a fortune," said Steve Smith. "It's pound notes all round. I always said you were my old pal, didn't I, Tom?"

Then in came Mary, and it wasn't little lambs she had, but a puzzled pair of Corrigan twins and the doctor's son.

I looked at her helplessly. I can't make speeches except when I'm angry. When I bust out, I take a lot of stopping, but unless something gets me worked up I'm a poor hand at public speaking. "You tell 'em, Mary," I said.

"Okay." She'd changed into thick slacks and a rain-proof jacket. She motioned everyone to sit down, then squatted on the hearthrug and said, "Did you hear what happened to the Comets this afternoon?"

Apparently they hadn't, so she gave them a brief summary of the match against Chalkly Arrows, the ultimatum from J. McTurk Stewart, and the mass walk-off by the

Comets team. "Leaving this poor mug," she concluded, "with a ten-pound bill and a fixture list to meet."

"I follow all that," said Archie Mulloy. He looked out of place in his neat grey suit; the rest of us appeared as always as if we'd been after rabbits and had to do our own ferreting. "It's a doleful story, but where exactly do *we* come in?"

"Don't get any ideas of holding us up for ten quid," chuckled Steve Smith. "I dunno about the bloomin' aristocracy over there"—indicating Archie with his thumb—"but I've got ninepence."

"We might manage a pound between us," said one of the Corrigan twins. "It would be a pity to see the Comets fade away."

"That's not it!" Hearing again from Mary the story of the afternoon had warmed me up. I felt angry all over again. "We don't want charity. What we want is members. *Playing* members!"

There was a complete, stupefied silence as I finished—as though I'd asked for volunteers to travel in a satellite. One of Steve Smith's eyebrows shot up, and a round, goggling eye peered from it, framed in enormous horn-rimmed spectacles.

It was Bert Appleby who spoke first. He got up from his chair and said, "Well, that let's me out. I like a game of soccer, but our farm doesn't run itself. We're a man short, and I'm needed every minute outside school hours. I wouldn't have come if I'd known what——"

"Wait a minute!" Mary moved swiftly across the room; stood between him and the door. "If between us we man-

age to whip up a couple of hours' unpaid help on the farm, would that free you to play? It's your Dad's the trouble? Am I right?"

Bert nodded.

"He can't object if we pitch in by sending someone over on Saturday mornings to do the work you'd normally do in the afternoons, can he? But that can be fixed up later, can't it? Sit down, Bert, and let Tommy go on. I'll make some tea—that is, if you don't mind, Tommy?"

"Go right ahead." I waited until Bert was settled again. "Now to put the club back on its feet is going to be a tricky proposition. We've got to get money, a new field, and a team that can hold its own against the rest of the county league."

"I can kick," said Steve Smith. "But I haven't played much soccer because of my glasses. Nobody bothers to give me a chance."

"My game's been rugger," said Archie Mulloy. "But I'm not much good at it, so I'm never in school matches. That means I'm always free on a Saturday—if someone's willing to teach me how to play."

I looked at the Corrigan twins. They were deep in a whispered conversation. "What about you two?"

The whispering stopped, and one of the twins faced me. His face was red with embarrassment. "It's a bit difficult. We'd both like to join the team, but there's one awkward snag."

"What's that?"

"We're supposed to be weaklings. Mother says we mustn't do anything strenuous. And there's an awful row

if we get ourselves muddy or dirty. We're not even allowed to go cycling in case we strain ourselves."

"But surely, you climbed Ben Nevis, didn't you?"

"Ah, yes. But Mother wasn't there!"

I thought for a moment. "Does your mother need to know that you're playing for the Comets?"

"It'd get around quickly enough in this village."

"Maybe it would," put in Archie Mulloy. "But by that time you'd have *proved* you weren't weaklings, wouldn't you? And then what went for soccer would have to go for cycling, and anything else you wanted to do."

That started off another round of whispering. In the middle of it, Mary returned with the tea. And while we drank it, we made our plans for recovering the goal-posts.

But the plans were never needed. Suddenly there was a ring at the front door, followed by a chorus of banging and rattling. Whoever it might be was in a terrible hurry or a thundering bad temper.

I went down the passage and flung the door open.

"Who the . . . ? Oh, it's you, Charlie. What's up?"

Charlie Maggs danced up and down on the doorstep in agitation. "That Turkey Stewart," he spluttered. "He's pinching our goal-posts!"

"What? Here, come on in."

Charlie followed me along the passage, squelching and dripping water. He looked round in astonishment. "What's going on?"

"Never mind that for a moment. Tell them what's happening to the goal-posts."

"It's Turkey Stewart," repeated Charlie Maggs furiously. "He's down there at the field with a couple of his men, pulling up our goal-posts."

Archie Mulloy jumped down from his seat on the edge of the table. "He can't do that!" he said indignantly. "Tom, didn't he give you twenty-four hours?"

I nodded.

"Then we can hold him to that! Come on, everybody. If we're going to put up a fight for the Comets, this is the first round."

The eight of us dashed into the hall, grabbing mackintoshes, and ran out into the street. Stampole Street is no six-lane motorway; it's a narrow lane in which the cobbles look as though they haven't been repaired for a hundred years. We raced through puddles, skidded round the muddy corner of the village green, over the grass past the vicarage, then down the rough track which led to the soccer field.

"There they are!" yelled somebody.

Far ahead, two lanterns bobbed in the darkness. They were close together; by their light we made out the silhouettes of three men, and then, as we drew closer, the white outline of the goal-posts and the nets lying on the ground.

I was running ahead of the others, and arrived seconds before them.

"Hey!" I shouted. "What d'you think you're doing?"

A lantern was raised. The glare prevented me from seeing the man behind it, but then came the voice of J. McTurk Stewart.

"Run away home, sonny, and mind your own business!"

"It *is* my business!" I yelled at him.

"That's young Tom Faraday," cut in another voice. I recognized it as one of Turkey Stewart's farm-workers.

"Whoever you are, run off home. This is private land."

"And those are our goal-posts. You gave us twenty-four hours to take them away. That twenty-four hours isn't up until tomorrow afternoon."

"Who says I gave you twenty-four hours? They're on my land, and I'm having them for non-payment of rent."

"Mr. Stewart!" It was Bert Appleby, just beside me. But his voice was drowned by Turkey Stewart barking an order to his men. The order was followed by an unmistakable sound—that of an axe on wood.

"Come on!" I bellowed, and leaped forward towards the man with the axe. But the next moment the back of Turkey Stewart's hand caught me a stinging blow across the cheek. That did it. I slammed my fist into Turkey Stewart's stomach. He grunted, raised the lantern to see where I was, and lashed out with his boot. It missed me; near by I heard scuffling and the sound of someone landing a solid punch.

"Mr. Stewart!" It was Bert Appleby again. "Hey, lay off, you fellows. Pack it up, everybody, for a minute. Mr. Stewart, this is Bert Appleby. You've been hiring my Dad's tractor, haven't you?"

"Yes, boy, I have. What are you doing mixed up with these ruffians?"

"Mr. Stewart, d'you know who keeps that tractor in

running order? I do. Unless you leave those goal-posts alone, it might not be in running order next time you want it. My Dad and I will see to that."

There was silence, broken only by the breathless puffing of someone who'd been out of practice at running. I fancied it was Archie Mulloy. Then Turkey Stewart spoke again, and all the bluster had gone out of his voice.

"Is that a threat, youngster?"

"You can call it anything you like," replied Bert calmly.

Another silence. Then, "Back to the farm, men. Leave this timber where it is. But I warn you lads, I'll be back for it tomorrow night if you don't take it away by then."

We stood in a half-circle, watching the lanterns fade into the distance.

"Well done, Bert!" said Archie. "What do we do now?"

"Let's meet tomorrow morning, with ropes and spades," I said. "We'll take the nets off and shift the goal-posts ourselves, and stow them away in my garden."

"Won't your Dad object?" asked Mary.

Nobody could see me grinning in the darkness. "If we keep going the way we've started tonight, I don't need to worry. Those goal-posts won't be there for long!"

Chapter Four

FIRST TURN-OUT—WITH SHOVELS!

IT WAS SUNDAY morning. We'd dug the other set of goal-posts out of the ground, then taken both sets apart, and moved them up through the village, using a bright idea thought up by the Corrigan twins. "Two wheelbarrows," they said. "Put them side by side, with a few feet between and lay the posts over the top."

Now, with the goal-posts safely stowed away, we held a second council of war—this time with the knowledge that nobody could arrive to sound the alarm that someone was stealing our property. We had nothing left to steal except four soccer balls, and they were packed away safely on a shelf in the greenhouse at Charlie Maggs's place.

Charlie had joined us, willing to give the club another try. That made eight—but only seven of us were players.

I had the club's books in front of me. "Things look pretty black," I said. "But we have got one lucky break. We've got Away games on the next two Saturdays, which means three weeks in which to find a new field and get the posts up again."

"Three weeks!" exclaimed Charlie. "D'you call that luck? We'll be doing well if we find a new ground in three years."

"Thank goodness we *have* got three weeks. We might easily have had a Home game again next Saturday. That would have finished us." I turned to Mary. "Any ideas about a new ground?"

"What about getting Bert to ask his father? Maybe there's a spare bit of meadow on the farm?"

"Ha!" Bert Appleby exploded. "Have you *seen* our farm? It's all hillside and swamp—you'd have to shift a thousand tons of earth to make a soccer field."

"You show us the place, and we'll shift it," I said boldly.

It was Archie Mulloy's turn to laugh. "Tommy, have you any idea what a thousand tons *means*? We'd be digging for a year—and then we'd have to find somewhere to put it. Also how much of it would be rock—whacking great boulders ten feet across? We'd never shift those without cranes and dynamite." He paused. "No, this job has to be done in three weeks. Let's not get over-ambitious. We've got to find level ground with grass on it already, that just needs hacking down and rolling. Bert, is there any spare ground at all that isn't on a hillside?"

Bert Appleby frowned at the floor. "The only bit we have at all is a useless patch down by the old quarry. It's no good to the farm, because there's no way of getting a tractor down there. But it's no use to us, either. There's a stream running smack through the middle of it."

That brought a groan from all of us, except one of the Corrigan twins, Terry. "Who knows anything about engineering?" he asked. "Because if we could get hold of some old drainpipes, wouldn't it be possible to run the stream through them, and cover them over?"

Archie Mulloy slapped his knee. "I think I know how!" he exclaimed. "But where do we get about two hundred feet of drainpipe for nothing?"

"There's a lot of old junk in the quarry," said Bert, "I've seen plenty of old drainpipes there—iron ones from the huts on the old army camp."

"That's all right, but how long would the job take?" I looked round the circle of faces. "We've no machinery, and there aren't many of us."

"We've got to have four more to make up a team," said Terry Corrigan. "If they're going to *play* for the Comets, they can do their fair share of the work, too. And I think I can find two who'll join. Joe Randall, for one."

"You mean the Honourable Joseph Randall?" I said, aghast. "Lord Randall's son?"

"That's the one. He's small, but he's good."

"Go on!" I told him. "He may be good, but you wouldn't get him playing for the Comets."

"Want to bet? I can try, can't I? And the other I thought of is Ronnie Peters."

"If you're going to have him," cut in Mary, "you might as well drag in those two new fellows down at the mill. They all go around together."

She wrote down all the names. On paper, that made a soccer team, but I shuddered to think what it would look like on a playing-field. And then, as I tried to conjure up a picture of this curious mixed bag of possible players, my heart sank.

"Boots!" I said. "What about boots, and shirts, and all the rest of it?"

It was Mary who put up the answer to that one. "Leave it to me," she said grimly. "My brother Harry let the club down. He's going to pay for that by going round all the others, making them chip in with their equipment. I'll see to that later today."

There was one of those silences which sets in at any meeting when everybody's trying hard to think if anything else has to be dealt with before breaking up. It was Bert Appleby who eventually spoke. "Anybody want to come down and look at that field?" he asked.

We all did. There was a steep climb down a rough path from the road, and at the bottom of a wide valley there was an open space of rough grassland. I'd brought a fifty-foot steel measuring tape of Dad's; we worked out that there was ample room for a soccer field, with space to spare at one side for practice. But Bert had been right about the stream. It ran in a gentle curve across the field, roughly at the half-way line. It was a channel about six feet wide, a foot deep, and with a broad trickle of water moving slowly away towards the river.

"What about those old drainpipes?" asked Archie. "If I'm going to be club engineer, I'd better find out straight away what I've got to do."

Bert Appleby led the way to the quarry. It wasn't much of a quarry, really; more an experimental digging which obviously hadn't been worthwhile, and had been abandoned. The workmen who'd had the job of tearing down the old army huts on the hillside had used the quarry as a dump. From where we stood on the edge, we could see at least thirty lengths of drainpipe. One

or two of them were broken, but the rest looked sound enough.

Archie stood there with his legs wide apart, frowning. From time to time he turned his head to glance back at the stream. "Tell you what," he said. "If you're all game to tackle this, then give me until after lunch to work out the way we're going to do it. Then put on your oldest clothes, bring barrows and shovels, and meet here at two-thirty." He spun round, glanced at his watch, and began to walk away. "And don't forget about getting those four extra chaps. We're going to need them." He looked once more at the stream, and shook his head. "Boy, we're *certainly* going to need them!"

We certainly did. I don't think any of us had the slightest idea of the size of the job we had ahead—otherwise we'd never have come back that afternon. But we did, with three of the new recruits, and we brought spades, a rope for hauling the drainpipes out of the quarry, and three wheelbarrows. There was no sign of Mary, though. I began to wonder if she was just one more of those people who're great in the planning stages, but who filter away quietly into the background once the hard work begins. But I'd wronged her. After we'd laid about six lengths of drainpipe in place and poured what seemed dozens of barrowloads of earth on top of them to level the surface, we were exhausted. I was cupping my hands for a drink of the brackish water in the stream when I heard Mary's voice crying out in alarm. She was half-way down the steep path to the valley, holding on desperately to a push-cart mounted on bicycle wheels. Archie Mulloy spotted

her at the same moment as I did. We both raced across the hummocky grass and up the path to meet her. She was leaning backwards, using all her strength to keep the push-cart from running away down the slope. Above the sides of the push-cart gleamed a wide, silvery lid. Steam floated upwards.

I took the weight of the front of the push-cart across my back. It felt like a load of granite.

"What have you got in that thing?" I gasped as, with Archie clearing the boulders in front, we lowered the push-cart gently down to the foot of the path.

"Hot coffee!" panted Mary. "A whole urnful of it. And there are some rock cakes. I'm no great shakes as a cook, so you eat them at your own peril."

Archie shouted to the others. The cups were a queer assortment, ranging from enamel mugs to bone china remnants from an old tea-service. But that worried nobody; the coffee had survived the journey and was scalding hot.

It revived us. As we drank it we looked across the field at the section we'd already covered. Apart from the stream the surface didn't appear too bad. There were hummocks of coarse grass here and there, but those would soon flatten out with a bit of rolling and chopping.

Archie and I walked down to the far side, where the drainpipes had already been laid. There was a steady flow of water coming out into a small pool Archie had dug. From this it raced away through a narrow channel covered with broken flagstones into the original stream leading to the river.

"So far so good," muttered Archie. "But it's very rough and ready engineering. If Bert Appleby's father lets any cows down here, they'll break it up in no time."

I glanced up at the hillside. "Stop worrying! He'd have to float them down by parachute. Come on, let's fetch another load."

By dusk we were a third of the way across the field, with only a wide red earth scar behind us to show where the stream had been.

Terry Corrigan threw his spade into a wheelbarrow and massaged his shoulders. "Whew!" he gasped. "I've had it for today. C'mon, let's pack it up until next week-end."

Archie laughed hollowly. "We'll never get finished that way. Don't forget we've got to get some grass on top of this earth. That means turves. And we've got to mow the rest of it."

"My Dad's got a big horse-drawn mower," said Bert Appleby. "We might be able to get it down here, but we'd never manage a horse down that slope without an accident. We'd have to pull the mower ourselves."

"How do we get the mower down?" asked Terry.

"On a rope, you mug! The mower's easy—it can't break its leg."

I felt dog-tired, but what I said was what I *had* to say. "Then it's volunteers for dawn patrol. Who'll join me here tomorrow morning?"

Chapter Five

BUILDING A TEAM

BUT MAKING A field in a hurry was only part of the problem; the same bone-weary mud-shovellers also had to be welded together into a soccer eleven by the following Saturday.

I climbed slowly up the steep hillside, trying to puzzle out the answer to *that* one. Even if the team could be made reasonably fit in time—and that would need fantastically hard work—somebody had got to drum into their heads about six first essentials of football, without which they wouldn't even know in which direction to run.

"Tom!"

I stopped, and turned on the narrow path to face Archie Mulloy.

"Wait for me. Phew! I'm puffed. Look, Tom, how are you when it comes to lectures?"

"*Lectures?* You mean things with lantern-slides of Stonehenge, and somebody pointing things out with a billiards cue? Not for me, thanks! Anyway, I haven't the time."

"You'd better find time for *this* lecture," said Archie grimly. "You're the one who's giving it!"

"*What?*"

"Well, not exactly a lecture. But if we're going to get a team together, somebody's got to tell us the *theory* of soccer. Running round in circles on the grass may get us fit as mountain goats, but . . ."

"I know. I was thinking about that when you caught up with me. But *I* can't give a lecture, Archie! I can't put ten words together without tripping over myself."

Archie peered into my face, then lifted one eyebrow in amusement. "D'you want to revive the Comets, or don't you?"

I said nothing.

"Well?"

"Okay, then. But where's this going to happen?"

"I've already talked to the others. They'll all be at my place tonight at seven. There's an old blackboard and chalk lying around somewhere—I'll have it all ready. And . . . Tom, don't get scared. Nobody's going to laugh at you."

I wasn't so sure about that. I rode back slowly to the village, trying to think back to the very first things I'd ever learned about soccer, and then to go forward from there, leaving out everything that wasn't absolutely essential for a man to know before he set foot on the field. And when I got home, Dad must have thought I was sulking all through supper; I just sat there at the table staring into space, working out moves in my mind, and trying to put into words things that had come to me by a sort of instinct.

Why couldn't it come to the others that way? The answer to that was easy enough—I'd spent two years trying

to learn French, yet only last week I'd translated "Ma mère est dans le magazin" as "The sea is in my magazine"—which had earned me nought out of ten marks! Yet there were at least three in my form who could yammer away in French as if they'd spent all their lives in the shadow of the Eiffel Tower.

No, it looked as though what French was to them, soccer was to me. And tonight I was going to learn what it felt like to be a schoolmaster!

All the lights were on at Archie Mulloy's house when I arrived, and there was a tangled heap of bikes propped against the porch.

"Good evening, Tommy. How's your father's back?"

I blinked. I never even knew Dad had a back—at least not in a medical kind of way. "Hello, Dr. Mulloy," I said. "Er . . . Dad's back's fine. I've come to see Archie."

"Oh, I know that all right. Mrs. Mulloy and I have been thrown out of the drawing-room so that everybody can fit in. Come inside—they're all here waiting."

He opened a door, and in front of me was what looked like a sea of faces. The team—and Mary—were spread out on chairs, on the floor, on the edge of a low coffee-table, and there were three struggling to sit on the same music stool. Everybody was talking at once, and somewhere in the background a radio was bellowing away.

Dr. Mulloy raised his hand, but nobody took any notice.

"Archie!" he called out loudly, but the din was so terrific that he'd have needed a megaphone to have any effect.

And then I thought of an idea. I pulled out my referee's whistle and blew it loud and long. Indoors, it made an ear-splitting shriek, and when I stopped the silence was so intense I could hear the traffic at the cross-roads half a mile away.

"Ready?" I asked.

Archie came weaving his way between chairs and the sprawling bodies of those on the floor. "Just a minute, Tom. I want to get a word in first. Look, everybody, it's like this. Tommy isn't a lecturer. He's never had to do this before in his life, and he's nervous. I don't blame him. And because he's nervous, he'll probably make an ass of himself. When that happens, we've got a choice. We can start laughing, and fool around, and stop listening to what he has to say. But if we do that, it means we shan't get a team together. So I suggest——"

"Dry up, Archie!"

"But Bert, this is important, because——"

"Come and sit down," said Bert. "You're wasting time. Let me tell 'em. Listen, everybody. The first man who takes the mickey out of Tom, or starts chattering, gets double digging duty down at the field—and a belt from me that'll make his nose look like a brussels sprout. Now, Tom, go right ahead."

"Well . . ." I began, and suddenly to my horror all that I'd planned to say went completely out of my head. I looked round the circle of faces, and gulped. There was a long, hideous pause.

"May *I* make one last suggestion before I leave you?"

"Why, of course, Dr. Mulloy."

"Try telling them first of all how *you* got so keen on soccer. Maybe it'll all come a bit easier after that."

"Oh, there's nothing to that! I started kicking a ball around in the back garden as soon as I could walk. The other kids all wanted to pick it up and throw it to each other, but whenever the ball came to me I always kicked it. Then when I started school there were always three or four of us who'd take a ball over to the village green after lessons. But what really got me going was a trip over to Branton with my uncle. It was a Saturday; and we were supposed to be back by lunch. But there was a sudden bus-strike or something, and we were stuck there for the afternoon. My uncle asked me what I'd like to do, and we were just about to go to the pictures when we saw the crowd going into the Branton Wanderers ground. They're in the Football League, if you don't know that already, and they were playing against Arsenal, from London."

"Even I've heard of Arsenal," interrupted Archie. Bert Appleby gave him a warning look, and Archie clapped one hand over his mouth.

"Well, believe it or not, Archie, at the time I went through the turnstile into the Branton ground, I *hadn't* heard of them. I was only eight, and as you know, you could live in this village all your life without knowing soccer had been invented. Anyway, we watched the game, and honestly it was the most exciting thing that had ever happened to me. In those days Arsenal had Tommy Lawton, one of the greatest centre-forwards there's ever been. I couldn't take my eyes off him! He was brilliant; he could hang on to the ball to the very last second when

attacked, and still pass it successfully to either wing. I think I learned more in that afternoon than in all the time since then!"

I stopped, realizing suddenly that I'd been talking for about five minutes without feeling nervous at all.

"Well," I went on, "what *did* I learn? The first thing was that in spite of the fact that I could kick a ball quite a long way, I was doing it wrongly. I'd been using the toe of my boot—but every man on that field was using his instep, with the toe well down underneath the ball. So when I got home, that was the first thing I did. I found that if I bounced the ball in front of me, and kicked it as it came up again, it *forced* me to do it the right way, and after a day or two of this I found I did it quite automatically. Try it yourselves in your own back gardens tomorrow. You don't need a soccer ball—an ordinary "blow-up" beach-ball will do. Then I started bouncing the ball higher, so that I had to get well off the ground to kick it.

Now that's the kind of kick you use for shots at goal, or for sending the ball upfield when you're throwing back an attack. But it won't do for passing."

"Tom!"

"Yes, Tony?"

"I'm sorry to be such a dope, but I don't understand about passing. Who passes, and why?"

Somebody laughed scornfully—I think it was Charlie Maggs, wedged between Archie and Mary on the piano-stool at the back. Bert Appleby scowled, and raised a huge, grimy, hunched-up fist in warning.

"Okay, Tony, let's settle your problem." Behind me

was the blackboard; I marked in five small crosses for the forwards, then some circles for opposing defenders. "Now, Tony, you know the forwards' job is to get through the enemy defence and score goals?"

"Oh, sure, I know that much. I've *read* about soccer—but . . . well, I've told you how it is in our family. I've never even seen a game for more than two or three minutes from the top of a bus."

"Crikey!" Charlie Maggs again. "I wouldn't put up with being——"

"Shut up!" bellowed Bert. "Let Tom get on with it."

"Sorry. I only . . ."

"Well, don't 'only' any more, or I'll spin you round till your backbone's like a corkscrew! Carry on, Tom."

"Passing's the only way to beat the defence. One man can't hope to get through on his own unless he's really caught the defence on the hop. So when he's attacked, he sends the ball away to another forward, who carries it ahead until he, too, gets threatened. Then he can pass the ball back, or on to a third forward. That way the defenders are baffled."

"So am I," said Tony in a helpless sort of voice. "You'll just have to *show* me on the field. I'm hopeless at noughts and crosses on a blackboard."

So I went on—through passing, taking corners, goal-kicks, free-kicks, penalties, heading, trapping the ball, intercepting, dribbling the ball with one foot, and some of the simplest of the dozens of tricks for outwitting an oncoming defender or getting the ball away from a fast-moving forward. At some stage Mrs. Mulloy came in with

a tray loaded with glasses of orange juice; I gulped mine down and carried on, until the blackboard was a chalky jungle of scribbled diagrams, and my voice was dying away to a hoarse croak.

"And that's it," I said finally. "I could go on all night, but I'm sorry to have to remind you we've got an appointment at dawn!"

I staggered out to my bike and stood beside it, too tired to climb into the saddle. I'd weathered the storm—got through it without collapsing in a heap, but whether all I'd said had gone in one ear and straight out of the other I had no idea.

"Come on, Tom. I'll ride back with you."

It was Mary Naughton.

"Thanks. But I'd rather walk. If I ride, I'll probably fall asleep in the saddle."

We pushed our bikes out of the Mulloys' driveway, and started along the narrow lane towards the green.

"Was that honestly the first time you've ever talked like that—in public, I mean?"

"The first, all right. And I hope it was the last. I felt an awful fool."

"You didn't look like one from where *I* was sitting! Gosh, why did I have to be a girl?"

I stopped the bike. "What's wrong with being a girl?"

"Oh, nothing, I suppose. But I wish I could be in the team, instead of just making coffee, and running messages."

"Look, Mary, *somebody's* got to do those things, haven't

they? Where would we be if we hadn't got you nagging us when we forget things—and keeping us stoked up while we're digging?"

"Mmm. Maybe." She was silent for a moment, then pushed her bike along the lane again. "Maybe I *can* do more!"

"What d'you mean?"

"Ah!" said Mary mysteriously. "Wait and see. If I tell you now, you'll be disappointed if it doesn't work out. If I've anything to tell, it'll be in the morning. I'll see you at the green on the way to school." She climbed on to her bike at the corner of my lane, and rode off into the darkness. "Good night!"

If there's anything that I can't stand, it's secrets. At any other time, what Mary had just said would have left me boiling with annoyance with her. But tonight I was too tired even to lose my temper. If Mary wanted to play at secrets, then let her. All I wanted was a bath, and ninety-six hours of continuous sleep.

I looked at my watch as I opened the front door. What I was actually going to get was about seven! And it seemed only seconds after my head touched the pillow that the alarm clock was ringing, warning me that it was ten-past six and that I'd promised to meet the rest of the team for early morning digging at seven.

I stood up, and my eyelids tumbled down as if someone had tied lead weights to them. I switched on the bedside light; the room swam blearily in front of me. I staggered over to the mirror and looked into it. "Tom Faraday," I muttered, "you're a blithering idiot! Go back

to bed again, and forget about digging at dawn. You'll never get that field ready in time—and anyway, I bet you're the only one who's daft enough to turn up."

I could see the reflection of my bed in the corner of the mirror. Never had a bed looked so tempting! I turned my eyes away from it hurriedly, and went to the bathroom to splash my face with cold water.

That did the trick! Our water-tank in the loft stays cold even in the height of summer, and the jet from the tap in the middle of autumn would have woken the dead. It certainly woke me, and within ten minutes I was riding through the grey light towards the Appleby farm, eating a sandwich.

It was a good job I *did* turn up! For even before I'd reached the foot of the steep path, I heard the clink of shovels and the murmur of voices.

"Come on, Tom!" yelled Bert Appleby. "You're on drainpipes this morning."

And so I carried drainpipes on my shoulders for an hour and a half, but my mind was already leaping ahead to the work that was just as urgent—that of training the diggers and levellers to play soccer. If they went at it with the same enthusiasm, then perhaps there really *was* a faint chance of success.

It was Monday morning, and results had to be achieved by Saturday. Of course the levelling of the field was really doing two jobs at once—getting the ground ready and also taking the fat off those members of the team who'd never run a yard before except to catch a bus. But what I wanted to see was the way they'd look in soccer gear; the way

they'd kick, and pass—and most of all the way they'd last out a ninety-minute match.

I was at the green ten minutes before the school bell, and in the distance I saw Mary running towards me. There was a look of triumph on her face as she arrived; she grabbed me by the shoulder and said, "Wednesday evening. It's all fixed up through my cousin."

Apparently she'd forgotten that she hadn't even *started* to explain her idea.

"Okay," I said, as she hopped from one foot to the other in excitement. "That's fine. Wednesday evening's all fixed up. That's great! But *what's* fixed up?"

"The coach, Tom! My cousin's coach."

"What—a real, honest-to-goodness soccer coach?" I couldn't believe my ears. "Who is he? Where did you find him?"

Mary looked suddenly downcast. "No, Tom, not that kind of coach. Sorry if I raised your hopes too much." Then she brightened. "It's a coach to take us to Branton on Wednesday evening. The Wanderers have a mid-week match against Chelsea. I thought I'd seen something about it in the paper, and for once I was right. So this morning I rang my cousin—the one who has the garage—and asked him about the coach. And he said he'd be going over to Branton with about fifteen people who'd booked for the round trip to see the match, so it wouldn't be any bother to squeeze the twelve of us in as well. It won't cost a penny, Tom, except entrance fees for the game. We can each pay our own. What do you say?" She looked at me anxiously, as if she thought the plan had misfired.

"What do I say? What *can* I say, more than I said last night? There's nothing wrong with being a girl, and doing all the donkey work, if a girl does it as well as you're making out. I wouldn't even have *thought* of that idea, let alone arrange it."

"Will you let everybody know?"

I shook my head. "Oh, no, Mary. It's your scheme—you see it through. I'm not going to steal the credit."

That evening, most of us gathered down at the field to continue work on the drainpipes, and we arranged for the first practice turn-out on the following morning. It dawned bright but cold; I rode to the field in my soccer gear, with my boots swinging on the handlebars. And there I got a shock. For Mary's pressure on her brother had succeeded in making him ashamed enough to go out and collect most of the old Comets' equipment. Somehow, by bullying him every second of the day and chasing him out of the house for yet another round of begging and borrowing, she'd got together enough shirts, shorts and boots for every player. Some of the shorts were going to need a bit of alteration before being worn in public—Steve Smith's in particular. They hung down to a point midway between his knees and his ankles, and there was such a gap round the waist he could have dropped his young brother in beside him without too tight a squeeze. But at least we were in Comet colours, with boots and a ball and an hour or more to make a start.

We stood shivering in a group on ragged turf we'd mown the night before. Nobody seemed to know what to do; they looked steadily at me, waiting for my instruc-

tions, so I broke them up into three groups, and sent them away to different sections of the field. We hadn't fitted up the goal-posts yet, but there were four extra lengths of drainpipe, and Archie helped me fix them up as markers.

I called out to Charlie. "Take Archie, the Corrigans, Steve Smith, and the chap from the mill."

"Ginger Thomas?"

"That's the one. Teach 'em to shoot past you. Nothing fancy; just how to get a boot well under the ball, and how to pass across the goal-mouth."

That left Bert Appleby, Ronnie Peters, Ginger's brother Reg, and myself. For the moment I imagined myself as a centre-half, though I'd never played in that position. What I had to do was build a defence out of nothing, and with a man short. I set up three stakes in midfield, then told Reg to attack down the centre. The idea was that Bert and Ronnie tried themselves out as full-backs, with the job of tackling and clearing. Bert's weight alone meant that he had a good chance of getting the ball off the foot of an opposing forward; what I was anxious about was the move he'd make *after* that. The instinctive thing for a full-back who's still wearing his "L" plates is to kick the ball wildly away across the half-way line, probably yards in front of the forwards, and straight to the feet of the enemy. That was the idea of the stakes. They were to represent our own forwards. I spent fifteen minutes trying to cure both Bert and Ronnie of overkicking. Then came a ten-minute course on how to break up an attack on the wing, by tackling, and also by covering and thus delaying the

winger's run long enough so that the rest of the defence could get back within the danger area.

Then I remembered something. I cupped my hands round my mouth and searched for the figure of Terry Corrigan amongst Charlie's group at the other end of the field.

"Hey, Terry," I shouted. "What about your Honourable bloomin' Joseph Randall?"

Terry stopped in mid-stride, allowed the ball to run away gently from his feet, and let out a peal of lunatic laughter.

Then he loped across to where I was standing. "The Honourable Joe? You should have heard the back-chat I had with the Honourable and his Dad. Funniest thing that ever happened to me. When I'd finished talking I almost burst out laughing at the sight of them. They must have thought I was awfully cheeky. Of course, I got nowhere. His Dad looked me up and down as if I was some kind of zoo animal."

"You got nowhere, Terry?" Archie Mulloy pointed up the hillside. "Then who's that?"

Ten pairs of eyes—no, eleven, including Mary's—looked upwards at the figure laboriously climbing down the path.

"Good grief!" exclaimed someone.

It was the very first time I'd seen the Honourable Joseph Randall. From a distance of fifty yards he looked like one of those comic figures made of matchsticks, with a large plasticine head balanced on top.

But it was his clothes which really took the biscuit. He

was wearing a sort of bright red blazer with gold and purple stripes on it. That would have been bad enough if the stripes were vertical, but they weren't. They ran round him horizontally, giving his top half the look of a three-coloured barber's pole. He also wore a cap with a tassel, from underneath which he peered out through glasses even bigger and rounder than those of Steve Smith.

"Suffering cats!" said Archie Mulloy under his breath. "We can't use *him*! Terry, you must have been crazy to pick on him."

Terry Corrigan shrugged his shoulders. "I'm sorry. It certainly does look as though I've dropped a bit of a clanger. But I *did* hear he was a player. Honestly I did. And there seemed such a lot more of him in grey flannels than there is now."

We went over to meet the eleventh man as he reached the foot of the path and came towards us.

The Honourable Joseph Randall stood at the edge of the field, balancing awkwardly on bright new yellow soccer boots. His thin, knobbly knees were the blank white of knees which hadn't been uncovered for years except on bath night, and the wrists that stuck out from the sleeves of his incredible blazer were hardly any thicker than my thumbs.

He smiled sheepishly, with his head on one side. "How d'you do, fellows," he whispered. He glanced at each of us in turn. "My name's Joe Randall."

"Well, hi, Joe," I said uneasily. Then, a bit stiffly and formally, because I didn't know quite how I ought to talk to an Honourable, "I'm very pleased you could come."

There wasn't much else I *could* say, was there? "This is Archie Mulloy, and . . . Terry Corrigan you know already. Then there's . . ."

I don't think he heard a word I said. He was looking at the mud on the ground, and then at his clothes, which still had the folds in them from the outfitter's shelves.

Maybe I was a bit angry with Terry, but I said sharply to the Hon. Joe, "Dump your jacket over there on the tree. We'll have a five-a-side game; I'll referee. Ronnie, you take one team; Bert, will you lead the other?"

They went into a quick huddle to sort out the players fairly, and then lined up with three forwards, a back, and a goalkeeper. The unfilled section of the stream provided a bit of a problem, but it was one which would affect both teams in turn, so in point of fact it wasn't unfair.

I blew my whistle, and almost closed my eyes at the sight of what followed. Ronnie's team had Steve Smith at centre-forward; he passed to Terry Corrigan's brother Tony, on the right, who kicked wildly at the ball and promptly fell flat on his face. A wild rush by Archie from the forward line sent the ball upfield; he galloped after it until it rolled into the stream, slipped on the banks and sat down suddenly on a heap of drainpipes with a loud yell of agony.

Steve Smith recovered the ball, looked round him for Tony Corrigan and then, seeing that Tony was still picking himself up, tried to send a pass across the field to the Hon. Joe.

But then, miles upfield and playing a sort of mixed position which combined full-back and centre-forward,

came Bert Appleby, thundering down upon little Steve and executing what can best be described as a sliding tackle which went wrong. The idea of a sliding tackle is to slide on to your back, swinging your leg at the ball to block an opponent's kick. Whether that was what Bert intended, it was impossible to guess, but it certainly wasn't what happened. Travelling at considerable speed about a foot above the ground, he hit Steve on the knee-caps with his stomach, there was a loud grunt from the pair of them, Steve's arms went flailing high in the air like a prisoner begging to surrender, and the ball slipped out from under Bert Appleby's shoulders and back into the stream.

There were now four men on the ground; the other six stood staring at them, obviously wondering whose turn would come next. Tony Corrigan was slowly picking himself up and gouging lumps of wet clay off his face; Archie was still sitting on the bank of the stream nursing his ankle. Steve Smith, flattened into the turf by the enormous weight of Bert Appleby, was peering upwards between his legs and groping for his glasses, which hung on Bert's left boot.

Only a Cup Final referee would be skilled enough to judge fairly what had happened. I was too stunned to do anything except order a free kick against Bert's team, providing there was anybody on his feet to take the kick.

There was. Terry Corrigan came up as I beckoned with my finger. I showed him what he had to do. He looked distrustingly at the ball, then at his right boot, moved back

a full ten paces, and charged in as if running up for the long jump. The ball rose high into the air, swung to the left, and bounced against the hillside half-way up the path to the farm-house.

"Good grief!" exclaimed Terry, "did I do that all by myself?"

Mary recovered the ball and booted it back towards us. It was the first good kick I'd seen that morning. Maybe she was right—she should have been a boy! We could certainly have done with half a dozen Mary's in the team.

It was a throw-in to Bert's side; Bert took it himself, aiming for Archie, who was limping round and round in a small circle, muttering under his breath. Archie never even saw the ball; it was intercepted by Tony, who sent a ragged pass for no particular reason across the field to the Hon. Joe.

I'd been too busy until then to notice the Hon. Joe, but at this precise moment the Hon. Joe was squatting on the turf, doing something curious close to the ground with an enormous magnifying glass.

"Wake up!" yelled Steve.

Startled, the round head shot up, and the matchstick-legs straightened. The Hon. Joe looked at the approaching ball with mild curiosity, and lazily put a foot out to stop it.

He did stop it. Then the other foot punted it downfield a little; he caught up with it, fooled Bert Appleby with a dummy pass, dribbled rapidly down towards the goal-mouth, and then shot in a sizzler which went exactly in

the opposite direction to the one in which Charlie Maggs dived.

I stared unbelievingly. The ball came back to midfield, and from the kick-off it was sent out to the right. It was missed by the winger; the Hon. Joe collected it neatly, ran three paces with the ball at his feet and the magnifying glass in one hand, and then passed it crisply over to Steve Smith as Bert raced in to intercept.

The pass caught Steve on the wrong foot, but he recovered and lobbed it over to his right. Tony Corrigan stopped it accidentally with the small of his back, and fell down again.

It was a chance for Bert's forwards. Archie bore down on the ball, still limping. He collected it on his left foot, dribbled it neatly for two or three paces and then, as if too surprised by his success to do any more, miskicked wildly. The ball smacked hard against the far bank of the stream, from which it rebounded at an angle straight to the Hon. Joe.

The Hon. Joe looked at it in complete astonishment, as though having once got rid of it he'd not expected to see it back again for months or even years. Lazily he hooked it with one spindly foot, dribbled cross-field, skirting Terry Corrigan and Bert, then put in a high long-shot which might just have gone under the cross-bar if there'd been real goal-posts.

I hardly knew what happened after that. We were a motley bunch, with the ludicrous Tony Corrigan falling down every time he went for the ball, and several others running vaguely up and down the field without a glim-

mering of an idea of what was going on, or what they themselves were supposed to do. But in our midst it looked as though we had a team-builder's dream—a forward with brains, speed, and ball control, yet who looked such a hopeless deadbeat that he'd deceive every man he ever played against.

The Hon. Joe was everywhere—yet he never seemed to be making a deliberate move into position. One moment I'd see him out of the corner of my eye, well downfield and apparently staring vaguely at the clouds sailing over the quarry, then only a second later he was at the other end, with the ball at his feet and the magnifying glass held up aloft like a banner, twisting and turning past the defenders without seeming to make any effort.

And once he came within range of the goal, there was no hope of stopping him. Whichever way the goalkeeper leaped to save, the ball went the other way. Charlie Maggs was no beginner. He'd been with the Comets since before my time; had saved vital goals in important matches, had outwitted half the forwards in the county, but he was no match for Joe. Each time the ball sailed in past him, he put his hands to his head in horror, and then stared at Joe's retreating back as if he couldn't believe what was happening.

Don't ask me what the score was. I began to feel like the referee in that celebrated match in Scotland over eighty years ago—the game between Arbroath and Bon Accord, which the Arbroath team won by thirty-six goals to nil. I once read about it; the referee claimed he'd had to borrow

a notebook from a man in the crowd so that he wouldn't lose track of the score.

I do know that Bert's team got none, and that every goal for Ronnie Peters' side was put through by the fantastic spindly legs of the Hon. Joe. And it made little difference after the change-over, when every attacking move he made had to be across the open section of the stream.

When everyone except the Hon. Joe looked worn out, I blew the final whistle.

"I wondered when on earth that was coming," gasped Terry Corrigan, resting his hands on his knees and blowing like a whale. "Hey, Tom, what price me as a talent scout now?"

I flung the ball at him. "Don't kid me! You had no idea the Hon. Joe could play the way he does." I swung round as Joe Randall wandered up to me, studying through his magnifying glass something he held in the palm of his hand. "This is *Agropyron repens*," he murmured.

"It sure is! I dunno what you mean, but if that's the kind of soccer you play, it's okay by me whatever it's called."

Joe blinked at me through the wide lenses of his glasses and said impatiently, "No, not the soccer. This grass. It's *Agropyron repens*. Deadly stuff for a playing-field. I expect you know it as couch grass. We'll have to get rid of it."

"Joe, we'll get rid of anything you like, and mow the field until it's like a bowling green. Just promise me you'll play like that all the time."

"Oh, yes, of course I will," he said absently. "What puzzles me is finding *Agropyron repens* in a spot like this." He picked up his weird striped blazer from the trunk of the fallen tree, flung it vaguely over one shoulder, and pottered off once more, picking up fragments of grass and scowling at them.

"Well?" asked Archie Mulloy.

"Well what?"

"You know," he said impatiently. "What chances do we have on Saturday?"

I grinned at him. "Did you ever hear of the Revie plan?"

"Unh?"

"The Revie plan. It was an attacking scheme Manchester City had a few seasons ago."

"And we're going to use it?" butted in Tony Corrigan. "Come on, fill in the details and we'll get started on it straight away."

"No, it's no Revie plan. This is something quite different. This is the Randall plan. The whole thing hinges on the Hon. Joe. Let's face it, next Saturday we're going to be the weakest team that ever crawled on to a soccer field. That is, but for Joe. He's our one and only asset. So the job of everybody is simply that of forgetting everything else except feeding Joe."

"What?" said Tony with raised eyebrows. "Sure, he could do with a bit of fattening up, but——"

"Shut up, you idiot, and listen! We feed Joe with passes, we play two of our forwards well back to help with the defence, and put our trust in Joe." I cupped my

hands and faced the direction the Hon. Joe had vanished. "Hey, there! Come back!"

There was no reply. The Hon. Joe was far away—waving his magnifying glass and searching for agro-whatever-it-was.

But what did that matter? Joe didn't need any further training.

Chapter Six

THE BRANTON TRIP

ALL THAT HAPPENED on Tuesday morning. In the breaks between lessons I tried to sum up what we'd learned, and the only thing quite definite was that everything hinged on the Hon. Joe. Without him we were so awful we'd be booed off any soccer field within the first five minutes after the kick-off.

The rest of the week would have to be spent in basic training—with the hope that Mary's scheme for watching Branton play Chelsea would produce results. Surely even the worst and dumbest of the Comets would be able to gain something from watching his first-class opposite number in action for a full ninety minutes?

Tuesday evening's digging completed the filling of the stream, and a ragged, exhausted cheer went up from the crowd around the final barrow-load of earth.

"Well done, Archie. You're quite a smart engineer." Steve blinked at him. "Of course we could have done the job in half the time if I'd been in charge, but you've proved your worth. When I'm chief of one of those big construction companies, I promise you I won't forget you. I'll give you a job. Yowch!" His voice rose to an agonized shriek as Archie grabbed him by the ears, then he broke

away and tore across the field with Archie in hot pursuit.

The next five minutes was lively and free entertainment for the rest of us—and good basic endurance training for Steve and Archie.

Steve leaped down the bank at the far side of the field, and disappeared round a heap of rubble from the quarry. Immediately there was a tremendous crash and a yell.

"Crikey!" said Mary, her eyes opening wide with alarm. "Don't say he's fallen down the quarry!"

But as she spoke, Steve emerged again, raced over hummocky grass and boulders up a slope, and vanished once again, this time behind a broken-down storage hut.

Archie came from behind the rubble, looked about him for any sign of Steve, and then moved slowly towards the hut. He went cautiously round one side; Steve came out cautiously from the other. Three times they stalked round the hut like Redskins on the warpath, then, suddenly Archie turned in his tracks and sprinted round in the opposite direction.

Steve realized what was happening, but too late. When he disappeared behind the hut, Archie was no more than two strides behind him. A second later there was a loud shriek, followed by curious muffled but hollow thumps.

Archie reappeared, and came back on to the field to join us.

"What happened?"

Archie grinned. "I gave him a lesson in engineering. Look!"

From behind the hut came a tottering figure, moving

jerkily to the right and then to the left, with both arms raised in front of it to ward off obstacles. It tripped and fell down, rose again unsteadily, and continued to weave and tack towards us.

"What on earth have you done?" said Mary indignantly. "Blinded him?"

"In a way, yes. Just an engineering experiment. Look, you can see properly now he's getting closer. You'd never have believed that old paint-can would fit over Steve's head, would you. Well, he didn't either. But it does, doesn't it! That was skill—sheer engineering skill!" He stared at Steve and added, "Plus, of course, two or three good wallops on top with a log of wood!"

Wednesday morning's practice followed much the same course as Tuesday's, except that the Hon. Joe seemed even better, particularly at some of the tricks most forwards master only after years of experience. Instinctively he avoided the classic error of taking the ball too far upfield and messing about with fancy footwork until the defence had time to get everybody covered. He also showed that in spite of his skill at attacks on his own, he wasn't simply one of those "rugged individualists" who've wrecked many a team through their determination to hang on to the ball in order to put in a scoring shot themselves. When there was a reliable man to take a pass, Joe passed.

It was also encouraging to see that Tony Corrigan had discovered how to stay on his feet when the ball came to him. He still ran awkwardly with the ball, dribbling it mainly with his knee-caps instead of his feet, but he'd come a long way in twenty-four hours.

The day passed slowly for me, perhaps because what lay ahead, in the evening, was so important.

We met at the garage owned by Mary's cousin, an hour after school. Most of us had brought sandwiches; we packed into the back of the coach and talked in low voices in order not to worry the paying passengers. When we reached Branton we joined the long queue of people moving slowly along the pavement towards the turnstiles.

At this point I briefed the Comets—told each man who he was to watch. "Remember this, that except at a critical moment up in the goal-mouth, don't be tempted into taking your eyes off your opposite number. He may be nowhere near the ball; that isn't important. What matters is that he's stationed himself in a particular spot. Watch him do that, then try to work out why he's chosen it at that particular moment."

It was easy enough to say, but how many of the team were yet capable of reasoning out why?

We were high up on the terraces, with a clear view of the whole field and the players' tunnel under the main stand opposite us. We bunched together waiting for the teams to come out, every man staring at the tunnel entrance.

Except Joe. The Hon. Joe wasn't staring at anything to do with soccer. He was reading a book on stick-insects!

Then they came—the men of Chelsea in their royal blue and snow-white collars, and the Branton Wanderers eleven in black and green and yellow diamonds. They streamed out of the tunnel, fanned out round the goal-mouths, and put in fierce shots at goal. So confused were

some of the Comets that Tony Corrigan, for one, thought play had started. He looked from one end of the field to the other in a mystified way, baffled to see a ball in play at each end. Then a slow grin of understanding dawned on his face.

At the kick-off he leaned forward eagerly to watch the Branton centre-forward touch the ball to his inside-left and launch an attack that swept down towards the Chelsea goal by a series of clever passes which had the defenders swinging from left to right and having to fall back almost to the penalty area.

The excitement was tremendous! Could Branton score in the opening minute? That would really be a back-page headline for tomorrow's papers—and for a moment it looked as though they'd do it, as the centre-forward trapped the ball neatly with his left foot just in front of goal, glanced to each side, and then steadied himself for the shot.

But he delayed too long. The centre-half, racing round in a half-circle, kicked the ball right off his toe, gently along the ground towards the goalkeeper, who scooped it up and flung it away to the wing.

I heard a gasp go up from Archie Mulloy.

And within ten seconds there was good reason to gasp, for Chelsea followed up their clearance by a steady, relentless attacking move using all five forwards in a perfect "W" formation, in turn outwitting the Branton half-backs and bringing the ball in from the wing at the crucial split-second before the full-back attacked the outside-left. For a moment Chelsea had an open goal in front of them

—and then they, too, hung on to the ball a fraction too long, allowing the Wanderers' defence to get back in position. The shot, when it came, was deflected by the Branton centre-half, and spun away behind the line for a corner.

"Now," I said, "watch this, everybody. The idea here isn't just to lob the ball back into play from the corner-flag. The wing-forward has the job of putting the ball into position for a shot at goal."

We watched. The Chelsea winger placed the ball, walked back, and then paused for a second while his eye roved round the circle of players, noting which of his own forwards were well-marked, and selecting the best spot to aim his kick.

"Here it comes!" muttered Archie. The winger raced in, arms well out from his sides for perfect balance, foot well under the ball so that it rose just above head-height, and didn't begin to come down again until level with the near-side goal-post. Three men leaped for it; two Chelsea forwards and a lone Branton defender, the centre-half. With a twist of his head the Branton man deflected it out of the penalty area and to the feet of his own centre-forward lying in wait a dozen yards out.

And now it was Branton once again sweeping the full length of the field, with no mistakes this time, no wasted efforts, no delays. Racing ahead, the forwards swung passes, keeping the ball constantly on the move, never allowing themselves to be slowed up by the Chelsea defence. The ball went out to the right-winger, who dribbled it across the half-way line, passed to the inside-

right, who held it for only a stride before swinging it hard across to the left-wing. The winger, menaced by the Chelsea full-back, promptly passed well ahead to the centre-forward, momentarily unmarked and just safe from being caught offside. He put it out again to the winger, who moved in as though to score, and at the last second, with two men coming at him, slipped a tricky pass with the outside of his boot, sending the ball to the inside-left.

It was the inside-left who scored—with a low, hard, angled shot which never rose more than a foot above the ground and curved its way into the net six inches away from the goalkeeper's fingers. A roar went up from the crowd, and Mary danced up and down beside me yelling, "It's a goal!"

From that first success, with only ten minutes or so of the first half gone by, Branton never let up for an instant. Occasionally I glanced at the row of Comets beside me; their eyes were glued to the field; they were silent even when the crowd was shouting at its loudest. They were doing as they'd been told; following every move of their opposite numbers, and learning—or so I hoped—the reasons why the moves were made.

And when it was all over I exchanged a brief nod with Mary—a nod of congratulation. It had been her idea, and it had worked. The Comets were still silent as they climbed back into the coach, and it was the silence of concentration.

The motley crew of misfits was beginning to get the first glimmerings of soccer. The seed had been sown; the

seedlings were starting to show above the surface of the soil. Now all that was needed was plenty of sun and plenty of water.

For by Saturday afternoon, less than seventy-two hours away, they had to be more than seedlings!

Chapter Seven

AWAY MATCH AT HORSLEY

So MUCH FOR Wednesday. The time was flying so fast, and there was still so much to be done. Work on the field would have to be postponed for the moment in order to pack in the maximum amount of training on Thursday morning's session before school began.

There was a new enthusiasm among the Comets when we met at eight o'clock, with the dew on the grass and a cool breeze blowing down the valley. When I arrived, the Hon. Joe was already at work with Bert Appleby, outwitting him over and over again, stopping every time to explain a possible answer to the trick he'd just played.

"Here's one," he said as I ran up. "I'm a forward on the attack, and I have the ball. You're racing in to tackle me right in front of goal. Now watch this!"

Just as Bert reached him, the Hon. Joe brought down his right foot as though taking a shot at goal—but instead he stopped the ball with his left, rolled it back as Bert tried to kick it away, then pushed it a yard to the right and drove hard with his left foot before Bert could recover and continue the tackle. He was past Bert and away, with the open goal in front of him.

"Wow!" gasped Bert. "That caught me on the hop! Now show me the answer to *that* one!"

The Hon. Joe scratched his head. "Mmm!" he mumbled, "I'm afraid I don't know. I only just worked it out as I went along."

"The answer to that," I grinned, "is always to play on the same side as Joe!"

We practised three or four attacking moves, and spent a few minutes on the problem of marking by the defence, but all too soon it was time to pack up.

"Any *decent* schools would give us a week's holiday in a crisis like this," said Archie ruefully. "See you this evening."

But he didn't. By midday, steady rain had set in, and from my classroom window I watched the puddles grow on the concrete outside. After school, I found Mary Naughton waiting to intercept me on the village green as I went home. She came racing across from the shelter of a tree near the girls' school, shouting, "Hey, Tommy, wait for me!"

Her face was alight with excitement.

"What's up?" I asked her.

"An idea!"

"What, *another*? If it's as good as the last one, let's hear it."

"Not here. It's a bit complicated. Come on up to our house. I want to talk to you about it."

"But look, Mary, I ought to be down at the field for training within half an hour. I'm just off home to have a quick bite first."

"Don't be a nut! You're not going down there this afternoon. In this rain you'd all catch streaming colds and then we *would* be in a mess on Saturday. Remember, we have no reserves. If anybody crocks up, there's only one thing we can do."

"Tell me," I said heavily. "That's something that's been worrying me."

Mary reached up, and pulled her hair into a tight bunch at the back. "I'll have to cut my hair off, and play myself."

"Huh! But seriously, about this afternoon's training, everybody else will be——"

"No, they won't. I've seen to that—by telling everybody I could to pass it around. I rang one or two of them, and caught some more a minute or two ago as they came out of school."

"I suppose that makes sense."

"It does," said Mary firmly. "This team is going to turn out at full strength on Saturday if I have to nurse the whole eleven." She took in a deep breath, and her fierce expression relaxed. "So that's settled. *Now* will you be a sport and come round to our place—Mum's expecting you to tea."

"Well, then, I don't mind. But I'm in training, remember. No huge tea that'll fatten me."

"There'll be no huge tea if Harry gets at it first."

"Harry? Is he going to be there? Won't that be a bit——?"

"Huh! Don't you mind about Harry." She lifted up one foot, then ground her heel into the gravel. "*That's* Harry! Since the night he walked out on the Comets, he's

so scared of me he almost puts his arm up when he wants to speak."

We'd been talking underneath a chestnut-tree, with huge raindrops falling between the leaves, and an occasional conker dropping on the ground beside us. Now, in short bursts of running, we hurried along the road from shelter to shelter, until we reached the Naughton house.

According to Dad, the Naughtons used to be wealthy. Old Man Naughton—that was Mary's grand-dad—used to be a coachbuilder, and I suppose his business folded up into nothing when cars took over. But the Naughtons still lived on in the same big house; probably it was so full of dry-rot that they couldn't sell it. Mary's father worked at the Co-op, and they also kept about two hundred hens out in a bit of woodland they had at the back.

"Come on in," said Mary, and we entered the hall, which was big, dark, and draughty. "Chuck your mac on that chair, and we'll go in the kitchen. It's the only room we can keep warm."

"Hello, Tommy!" Mrs. Naughton closed the door of the oven, and pushed a chair in front of the fire. "Come and sit down. Mary's been telling me all about what you've been doing to try to revive the Comets. I think it's wonderful, and I'm so ashamed of Harry."

"Forget about Harry, Mother! We're doing fine without him.

"We . . . ell," I put in hesitantly, "we're doing fine about getting a new field. But we haven't played a match yet, Mary. We'll know how fine we're doing without Harry after Saturday."

"I'm sure you'll do splendidly," said Mary's mother. "You certainly deserve every success. Now you two get warm while I go and lay the tea-table."

I waited until she'd closed the door. "What's this big idea of yours, Mary?"

She avoided my eyes. "Now that I've got to talk about it, I'm not so sure it's such a brainwave after all. It's about the money."

"Money?"

"Yes, you goon, the money owed by the Comets. So far . . . well, you know as clearly as I do that we've been too busy to do anything about it. But this morning there was a letter for Harry—all the accounts used to come to him, as secretary, of course. The letter was a bill from the man we owe for the thing that marks out the lines. We've got to pay up straight away or he's coming here to take back the machine."

"He can't do that!"

"Oh, *can't* he? You should see the bit of paper enclosed with the bill. It's all small print about 'pursuant to this' and 'scheduled goods', but it means business all right."

"So what do we do?" I had a feeling of panic. I knew how to play soccer; I believed I knew a bit about how to train others, but the business side of the game was still right over my head. I'd never owed more than sixpence in my life, and debts amounting to more than that filled me with dread.

Mary took a deep breath. "I didn't know what to do, either. And it was then that I had this idea. But now I don't like it much. It's Joe. The Hon. Joe. His Dad's roll-

ing in money. Couldn't we ask Joe to get us the ten pounds to clear up all the club's debts—only on loan, of course?"

"But I don't see that makes much difference."

"Crikey, Tom, you're wooden-headed this evening. At the moment, we owe ten pounds that has to be paid off straight away. If we borrow it from the Hon. Joe, he'd be able to let us settle up with him over two or three months. That gives us breathing space to get some money. But as I said, I don't like the idea much."

"Mmmm! I don't like it, either."

"But it does give us a chance, doesn't it? And if we don't do that, how do we stop this Mr. Spradgett?"

"Who's he?"

"The marking-out-thing man. He'll take the marker away, and then where are we?"

I thought for a moment, and then I heard Mrs. Naughton coming back. "All right," I said hurriedly. "After tea, let's go round and see the Hon. Joe."

Mrs. Naughton came in. Behind her was Harry, and when he saw me he tried to turn round and go out again, just as he'd done every time he'd seen me at school during the past few days. But his mother took him firmly by the shoulder.

"Oh, no you don't! You've been dodging Tommy for long enough. Now you can apologize for leaving him in that muddle."

"He'd better do more than just apologize," said Mary hotly. "He'd better do something *about* it."

"I've already been round half the houses in the village collecting soccer gear," grumbled Harry. Then his face

brightened. "Tell you what, though. I'm willing to join up again and play on Saturday."

Mary Naughton's face went through about six changes of colour in two seconds.

"Well!" she gasped. "The cheek of it! You leave us to carry the can for ten pounds, and then when you're good and ready, you *condescend* to offer your services. You know what *you* can do, don't you, Harry? Go find a lake, and jump into it. And make it deep."

"Whoa!" I said quickly. "Don't let's have a row about this. Mary, you know Harry might come in handy in an emergency. Look, Harry, we've already got a full team for Saturday."

"You have? Gosh, I bet there are some corkers in it! Ten men walked out—and there aren't another ten soccer players between here and Chalkly."

"Don't worry—we've found a team. But if you really want to join again, you can stand by as reserve for Saturday."

"But I . . ." Harry looked as though someone had hit him a smart whack behind the knees. He'd never been a reserve in his life.

"Take it or leave it!" said Mary curtly. "If you don't take it, others will."

Who the others were that she was talking about, I hadn't a clue, unless she meant herself.

"Oh, *all right!*" muttered Harry angrily. "And I'm sorry about last week." He dodged round his mother and went out.

"That young man needs a good brisk conversation with

his father," said Mrs. Naughton. Then she added darkly, "Out behind the hen-run where the pea-sticks are kept!"

Then Harry came back and we went into the drawing-room for tea. Have you ever noticed how living-rooms divide up into three kinds? There's all the difference in the world between a sitting-room and a lounge—and as much difference between either of them and a drawing-room. What the Naughtons had was certainly a drawing-room; a big place with a high ceiling, old-fashioned furniture, and a huge marble mantelpiece over a tiny flickering fire that looked as though it could scarcely keep *itself* warm. Mrs. Naughton had pulled a low table on to the hearthrug, and we had an armchair tea with a noisy background from two budgerigars in a cage beside the window.

Mary was still red with anger when we sat down, but after a while she cooled down. It was easy enough to cool down in that room; I expected ice to form in my teacup at any moment. Gradually the ghost of a smile came into Mary's face, and she said, "Harry, if you want to square yourself, you can do some fly-posting."

That puzzled Harry as much as it did me. "Who wants flies?" he asked, frowning.

"Ass! You're neat with a pen. Make up some posters about Saturday's game, with a note on the bottom about the first Home match, telling them where the new ground is. Then stick 'em up round the village."

"But why d'you call them fly-posters?"

"I suppose it's because some people stick 'em on trees and telegraph posts. They're not supposed to, so I imagine

they slap 'em on quickly and then fly before they get caught. But you don't want to do that. There are plenty of notice-boards." She turned to me. "Cake, Tommy?" She waved a plate of cream-cakes in my direction, then moved it away quickly. "Oh, no, sorry. I forgot you're on a training diet. Rich creamy cakes with glacé cherries in them wouldn't do you any good, would they?" A mischievous smile came on to her face. "It's the *creeee-am* that does the damage, isn't it?"

The way she said the word cream was sheer torture.

"Well," I muttered. "I don't suppose just one would . . ."

By the time the laughter was over, the quarrel between Mary and Harry seemed to be over, too. It turned a rather uneasy tea-time into something much livelier, and I was sorry when it was time to start out with Mary to see the Hon. Joe.

Mind you, I was sorry anyway—because it's embarrassing to go begging, and even more so when you have to walk up half a mile of drive to do it.

My footsteps became slower the nearer we came to the start of the drive. I glanced once or twice at Mary. She avoided meeting my eyes.

"D'you want to back out?" she asked suddenly.

I nodded, then, as her eyes were still firmly on the road ahead, so that she couldn't possibly have seen the nod, I muttered, "Yes, I do. I can't just wander up to the house of a chap I hardly know, and try to borrow ten pounds."

"All right, then."

I turned round, and began walking back the way we'd

come. "Honestly, Mary," I said, "I think we're right to call it off."

There was no reply. Mary wasn't with me. I looked round hurriedly, and saw her, still walking towards the entrance of the Randall drive.

I raced back, and caught hold of her arm. "What's the idea? I thought we were calling it all off?"

"*You* were!" blazed Mary. I recognized this as another of her flare-ups, and backed away sharply. "*You* wanted to back out—not me!" She pulled her arm away and walked on a few paces. "You're as bad as my brother when it comes to something difficult. I know you boys. You're all tough as nails when it comes to putting up goal-posts, or filling in streams. That needs only muscles! But when it comes to something awkward, and embarrassing, then you haven't the strength to go through with it." She tossed her head. "*Boys!*" she said contemptuously. "Huh!"

After that there wasn't much choice open to me. I fell into step beside her along the last fifty yards towards the entrance.

The drive started at a pair of tremendous wrought-iron gates, with the Randall crest in red and gold on top of each gate-post; inside, there were broad lawns, lines of old oak-trees, stone fountains, and glimpses of summer-houses, ponds, and rustic arches. When the house came into view I was even more scared. It looked the size of Buckingham Palace, and there was a wide flight of about thirty steps leading up between stone columns to the front door. It was almost impossible not to march up the steps like a

small army; our footsteps sounded so loud it hardly seemed necessary to ring the bell after so much noise.

It was one of those old-fashioned bells that pull outwards. Far away indoors something tinkled, and we waited. I wanted to run for it, but when I began edging away, Mary shot me a look that stopped me in my tracks. It was the same kind of look I'd seen her give Harry. I didn't want Mary as an enemy, so I stayed put until the door opened.

Probably my mouth dropped wide open. I'd expected a butler in a tail-coat, or a footman in knee-breeches and powdered wig, but it was the Hon. Joe himself, in very dirty shorts, an old tweed jacket, and gumboots. His eyes widened. "Hello!"

"Hello, Joe. We want to talk to you."

"Certainly. Come in."

We followed him indoors. The hall was as big as a cinema, with dark shadowy corners, suits of armour, and huge gold-framed portraits hanging from the walls.

"I've been out at the back, gardening," said the Hon. Joe. "D'you mind coming through the house and talking while I carry on digging? I want to get about two hundred bulbs in by tonight."

"But don't the gardeners do that for you?" asked Mary.

The Hon. Joe blinked, and shot her a queer look. Then he started off down a wide passage with doors on either side. We seemed to walk for miles before reaching a conservatory and a door at the far end leading into the garden.

Joe picked up his trowel and took a handful of bulbs from a sack. "Right. Now what is it you want to talk about?"

I looked at Mary. This was her idea, not mine, and the talking would have to be done by her.

She went very red, and moved her weight from one foot to the other. "It's l-like this," she stammered nervously. "It's an awful thing we've come to ask, but . . ." Mary went back over the whole story of the Comets, then moved gradually closer to the matter of the ten pounds. And as she did so, I saw the expression change on the Hon. Joe's face—from interest to puzzlement, then to anxiety—and then, astonishingly, to amusement. By the time Mary finished he was obviously having great difficulty in controlling himself, and on her final word he exploded with laughter, his thin body shaking.

"So you think Dad's wealthy?" He dropped the trowel and flung his matchstick arms round himself like a milkman does to keep himself warm on a frosty morning.

"He must be a *millionaire*!" exclaimed Mary, looking behind her at the house.

The Hon. Joe chuckled. "I don't think Dad ever meant it to be a secret," he said. "But obviously the news hasn't reached you. We don't own this place any longer. Dad had to give it up. The Government's going to use it for something eventually. We have no money at all. We're just here as caretakers. Dad gets a few hundred pounds a year from writing for the newspapers, and the rest comes from selling off family possessions. Didn't you notice the blank spaces where there used to be pictures? You can tell

because the wallpaper's much cleaner." He turned to me. "Tell you what, Tom, I bet *your* Dad's got more money than mine!"

Then all three of us were laughing.

"But all your new soccer gear, Joe! Where did that come from? It still had the creases in it."

"You never came close enough to smell the mothballs! All that stuff's half a century old. Dad got it down from a trunk in the attic. He said it belonged to someone called Great Uncle Augustus—and by the look of that blazer, I shouldn't wonder!" He peered down at the bulbs on the ground. "Hey, I'd better stop talking, otherwise I shan't get all these in by dusk."

So Mary and I came to spend the rest of the evening planting bulbs in semi-darkness—with the ten pounds no nearer than before.

No nearer, that is, until just as we were going the Hon. Joe said, "I know how we'll raise that money!"

"How's that?"

"We'll have a Woodside Comets Fair."

"That's no go," I said. "We'd never get people to go all the way down that hill to the soccer field. Not the people who've got money to spend."

"Who said anything about that? I'm thinking of holding it here. We've got some old tents packed away in a summer-house, and there's all the space you could want near the front gates, where the tennis-courts used to be." He blinked through his glasses. "Let's fix the date for Sunday week. Will you leave it to me?"

Mary's face glowed. "Joe, you're a life-saver! Sure, we'll

leave it to you. Just yell for help when you need it, and tell all of us what we have to do."

And that was how on the following morning there was a letter waiting for me at the breakfast-table—in an envelope bearing the Randall coat of arms.

The Hon. Joe's envelope contained more sheets of paper than I'd ever received in one letter in all my life—even including ones from the kinds of aunts who write in letters half an inch high. I couldn't make head or tail of it at first, but gradually it dawned on me that between the time Mary and I left him and the last post, the Hon. Joe had drafted out a complete plan for what he'd called "The Comets' Carnival".

But then I noticed a few words scribbled in haste on the back of the envelope—words that really set me worrying. What Joe had written was, "Won't be at practice tomorrow. I think I've got a cold, but will try to be fit by Saturday."

Try to be fit by Saturday!

What on earth would we do if he wasn't? True, there was now Harry Naughton to take his place, but the whole plan of campaign depended on Joe. Without him, we'd have to use all our forwards in what I could only hope would be the attack, and leave our weak defence to do the best it could.

When I reached school, I told Harry. He grinned. "There," he said, "I *thought* you couldn't do without me!"

"I could do with ten of you," I told him fervently. "Get along to the practice game tonight, won't you? You'll get some shocks, but you'd better know the worst."

That practice game was the worst thing I've ever seen on a football field. The moment I broke the news that the Hon. Joe might be unfit to play, all the carefully built-up confidence seemed to ooze out of the Comets, leaving them just as they'd been in the beginning—a bunch of eleven ill-assorted people, of whom only three had ever played serious soccer at all.

"Where's Mary?" asked Harry.

"Up at the Randalls," I told him. "Rubbing camphorated oil on Joe's back, or something. Come on, we'd better get started before the light gets bad.

Charlie Maggs stationed himself in goal. "Let's start with you, Archie," I said. "Harry will pass the ball in to you from the left wing. You're at centre, and you collect the ball just outside the penalty area. I'm the opposing centre-half—so it's my job to stop you from getting a shot at goal. Got the idea?"

Archie nodded. I punted the ball out to Harry, who came racing along the wing from the half-way line, and sent in a fast, low pass straight to Archie.

Archie stopped the ball skilfully enough, but then looked blankly in front of him as I charged towards him. He didn't make a move until I was barely a foot away, and then attempted to swerve to his left.

He swerved, but the ball didn't. I was able to punt it between his legs, far beyond the half-way line.

It was obvious Archie wasn't ready for training that involved an opponent.

"Let's try ordinary shooting practice," I said. "Harry, will you show them a goal from the wing?"

Harry took the ball well back and close to the touchline. Then he raced towards goal with the ball at his feet, curving inwards to widen his target area. The shot was hard and low, but Charlie Maggs just managed to deflect it out of goal for a corner.

We tried Archie and two or three others at the same run-in, but the results made me close my eyes in horror. We closed in on the goal. Straightforward wide-angled shots at goal were the only thing the Comets were ready for.

After ten minutes of shooting practice round the goalmouth, we split up for a five-a-side game which was so ragged that each side scored twice—through their own goals. Harry Naughton looked aghast.

"Are you crazy? You can't put a side like that into a County League game. It won't just be seven-nil tomorrow, it'll be about thirty-nil. And they'll cut the Comets out of the competition."

"Like heck they will!" I told him. "Mary will get Joe fixed up in time—just you wait."

"For once I hope you're right. For once I hope I *don't* have to play. I'd rather spend tomorrow afternoon filling in my share of the stream than trying to hold *this* little lot together!"

We still had hopes of Joe on the following morning. The meeting place was at my house at one o'clock, giving us an hour to ride to Horsley and get changed. Most of the team turned up early, and at five minutes to the hour, Mary rode up with Harry. We could see the look on her face as soon as she turned the corner of the road, and so we knew the worst before she told us.

"He's in bed," she said. "When he gets a cold, it seems it always turns to asthma."

"What's that?" asked Steve Smith.

"A wheezy chest. Didn't you know? Well, Joe gets asthma, and that hits him worse than the cold. So I've brought Harry—he'll have to fill up the gap."

Harry didn't look any too pleased at being spoken of as nothing more than a gap-filler. He looked down his nose, and said, "Come on you kids. Let's get going. The guillotine's waiting, so let's get it over."

Maybe it was that which made me angry. I swung my leg over my bike and pedalled off savagely towards the turning into the Horsley road, and the farther I went the more furious I became. Surely Harry had the sense to know that a raw team needed encouragement, not sneers? A few more cracks like that and one or two of them would get so disheartened they wouldn't be able to stir a muscle all afternoon.

I must have set a record-breaking pace all the way to Horsley, for we were there with fifteen minutes in hand. Just long enough to get cold and stiff, hanging around on an open touchline, so I bullied everybody into changing straight away for a few minutes' knock-about. And while I was lacing my boots I ransacked my brains for a way to put some life into the team.

Team for team, man for man, there was no doubt about it, we weren't strong enough to beat Horsley even if they sent out their sisters and stayed to jeer on the touch-line. Was there any miracle plan which could save the game?

What would happen, for instance, if we began the game with a wild rush, using every man in the attack, and taking a chance on scoring before Horsley realized we'd left a wide open goal?

It might work. But would it gain anything? That was a trick that would only work once, and it didn't help much to have the score seven–one instead of seven–nil.

There had to be something better than that. C'mon, Faraday, I said to myself, if you're taking up this game as a full-time career when you grow up, you'd better start getting a bit quicker on the uptake. There must be a plan to cover this situation—or any other one. You just have to find it—and find it between now and the kick-off in five minutes' time.

The Horsley team were arriving. They looked tougher, heavier, and far fitter than the Comets, which was hardly surprising. What worried me most was the way the Comets stared at them. Tony Corrigan, for one, seemed to be realizing for the first time that this afternoon it was no longer a friendly kick-about against other members of the Comets, but a full-blooded match against first-rate opponents determined to win.

The ball came to me, and I passed it across to Archie for a shot at goal. It would be his last before the kick-off, for Horsley were already moving straight out from the touch-line into their playing positions, without bothering to have a kick-about.

Archie steadied himself, tapped the ball forward with his left foot, and shot hard with his right. The ball flew straight up into the air, spinning wildly, and landed about

six inches short of the corner flag. Archie himself sat down heavily in the mud.

This was going to be some match! I wished I could spend the next ninety minutes with my eyes closed!

The Comets moved raggedly into position. And as they did so, I had an idea—a hare-brained one, but even that was better than none at all. I spoke hurriedly to Archie.

"Pass this round quickly. Forwards fall straight back and help the defence. Don't bother to attack—just keep Horsley from breaking through."

Horsley kicked off, and the ball went swiftly to their right wing, who dribbled ten paces infield, then swung a pass right across the centre, above head height, to the outside-left. As he came in towards the penalty area to shoot, we saw his expression change as he discovered a wall of bodies protecting the goal. All five Comets' defenders were packing the goal area, and the forwards were ranged round the penalty area, not to tackle, but to block his shot. The ball went high and wide, and it was a goal-kick to the Comets.

Tire them out, I told myself. Make them run around all over the field, while we save our strength.

The Horsley forwards fell back as Charlie Maggs prepared to take the kick. At the last second, I signalled him not to boot the ball half-way down the field, instead, simply to tap it across to me.

He did. I stopped it, and glanced upwards. The Horsley forwards, taken by surprise at the end of their run back, were now charging towards me. I dribbled two or three

paces as if intending to break through, and then kicked the ball hard across towards the wing, just short of the touch-line and yards deep into the Horsley half.

That gave them something more to run for!

No Comets followed, and when the Horsley attack came down again, their skipper and centre-forward had a puzzled look on his face. Obviously he hadn't yet got the bearings of what we were trying to do.

That was all to the good, for once Horsley understood, we'd have to improve on our rough and ready plan.

The Horsley inside-right, as broad as a barn-door, and with heavy, muscular legs, charged towards me with the ball at his feet. I tried to hook it away, but instead took an agonizing hack that went right through my shin-pad and, by the feel of it, right through my leg and out again on the other side. As I fell, I saw Archie perform a most odd manœuvre. It began as a rugger tackle, then suddenly changed as Archie remembered which game he was playing. Instead of seizing the Horsley inside-right round the knees, as he'd obviously been planning, he spun round in mid-flight, and *headed* the ball almost off the tip of his opponent's boot.

It was brave, risky, and successful, for the ball went almost to Tony Corrigan's feet. Tony had been standing with an air of blank astonishment for some time, and the arrival of the ball was quite unexpected. Hurriedly and clumsily he kicked at it, and sent it over my head back towards midfield.

More running around for Horsley! And also more

puzzled looks when they found none of the Comets in pursuit as they raced back to recover the ball.

The next attack came from the left wing, then switched suddenly to the centre just outside the penalty area by means of a series of rapid passes which threw our defence into confusion. They fell back almost into the goal-mouth, and there was a brief flurry of wild kicking, with the ball bouncing from foot to foot before it went behind the line off Steve Smith.

"Crikey! A corner," panted Steve in my ear.

We fanned out, covering the Horsley players in the traditional fashion. With a corner, there weren't any surprises they could spring, so we packed tightly and hoped for the best. Luck was on our side; the Horsley man put in a bad centre that curved away behind his own forwards, otherwise we'd probably have been a goal down there and then.

It was at this moment that Harry Naughton broke out of the bunch of us near the goal-mouth and cut so swiftly through the Horsley forwards that he was away downfield and past their half-backs before they'd realized that, for a change, the Comets were on the attack.

Or, more accurately, one Comet was. For though Archie and the Corrigan twins started after him, I called them back. Harry's move was no part of the plan. Sure, it was an attack that might work, because Horsley weren't expecting it, but on the other hand the defence plan *was* working already. Make a plan and stick to it. Surely that must be right? The success of the plan hung on every Comet lying back in defence, to exhaust the Horsley team—

and then attacking hard in the last ten minutes of the game.

Harry was now coming in towards the Horsley penalty area, with two backs racing towards him, and the goalkeeper coming well out from the posts to narrow the chances of a shot.

I saw Harry poise for the kick, watched the ball shoot ahead, then rebound off the goalkeeper's knee. The goalkeeper chased it two paces, then punted it hard downfield towards the waiting line of Horsley forwards.

The referee's whistle caught me by surprise; I was moving across to intercept the new attack when it came, and for a moment I was puzzled. From where I stood, none of the Horsley forwards seemed to be off-side.

Then, far upfield, I saw the cause of the trouble. Just outside the Horsley penalty area there was a tangle of bodies. Both Horsley backs must have crashed headlong into Harry Naughton.

I ran upfield, catching up with the referee just before he arrived at the spot.

Both Horsley men seemed unharmed. They climbed to their feet a little groggily, then straightened up and grinned ruefully. But Harry didn't move; simply lay on the ground clutching his stomach. His face was white, and he was breathing great shuddering gulps of air.

"Can you stand up, boy?" asked the referee.

Slowly, Harry turned over and scrambled up to a sitting position. Two of the Horsley half-backs put their hefty shoulders under his arms and lifted him. I took his feet, and we carried him off to the tender ministrations of

Mary on the touchline—a flushed and angry Mary. "He *would*!" she exclaimed furiously. "You'd think he'd have had the sense to understand what you were planning."

"Don't blame Harry!" I said. "It was a temptation, and the darned fool fell for it. If I'd seen the chance, I think I'd have done the same."

Back on the field, the referee had awarded a kick against Horsley. I looked round at the other Comets questioningly; all of them just nodded, or turned away. Nobody wanted to take it. I cornered Archie. "Run in as if taking a shot towards the penalty area," I whispered hurriedly. "Then put your brakes on hard, and hook a backward pass to me, on your right."

He blinked, and looked at me with horror. Then he shrugged his shoulders. "I'll try anything once."

Horsley marked so close they practically stood on our feet. Archie moved back for the kick, ran in hard, twisted for the pass, and stumbled over his own feet with a look of bewilderment, knocking the ball a bare two yards in front of him. In a split second the Horsley forwards were in full cry down the field with only the backs and Charlie Maggs between them and the first goal of the match.

We raced after them hopelessly; the Horsley centre-forward tapped the ball ahead of him to the fringe of the penalty area, and shot hard and high—too high. The ball bounced off the cross-bar and landed at my feet, in position for a long punt into the other half of the field.

We fell back into defence again—with a man short. Someone like Tony Corrigan could have been spared, but

the loss of Harry was serious. I'd been relying on him as the spearhead when at last we were ready to attack; now, unless Mary was able to straighten out the knots in his stomach, we'd seen the last of Harry in this game, and the attack was going to be impossibly weak.

And then, surprisingly soon, it was half-time, with no score against us. As we came off the field the Horsley skipper muttered, "Are you going to play a spoiling game all through this match?"

I shrugged my shoulders. "What would *you* do?"

He grinned. "Yeah, maybe you're right. But it doesn't make much of a game."

"We'll give you a game *next* time. Have you seen our record this season? Just now all we care about is results!"

Harry was sitting at the touch-line with a coat round his shoulders. "Sorry, Tom," he said with a sickly smile.

"Never mind that! How are you? Can you come back on again?"

"I say I can, but Mary says no. And she's the boss on this side of the touch-line."

There was no answer to that. And it meant ten men for the rest of the game, just as I'd feared.

But the second half began so peacefully that we were almost lulled into believing that our plan had succeeded already—that Horsley were tired, with the sting taken out of their attack. Fifteen minutes of play went by with the ball mostly in midfield, for every Horsley forward was so half-hearted that it was as if they didn't even expect to break through.

But then, with a suddenness that caught us right off

balance, came a tremendous rush down the left wing, well supported in the centre by a trio racing along in readiness for a pass.

The pass came, close to the ground and timed perfectly to reach the centre-forward as he arrived at the penalty area, and before we could move back from the defensive arc facing the left wing, the ball was in the net, inches wide of Charlie Maggs's hands as he flung himself full length in the mud.

He climbed to his feet, recovered the ball, and kicked it towards midfield. I discovered Terry Corrigan beside me.

"That's about that, I reckon!"

"Cut it out, Terry! One goal against us isn't the end of the game. Keep plugging away in defence for another five minutes, and then we'll let 'em have it!"

"Let them have *what*?" His voice was strained; almost a whisper. I looked at him carefully, then stared round at the rest of the Comets in turn.

Terry was right. There wasn't any "it" to let them have. The Comets, to put it bluntly, were pooped. They'd been hanging on, hoping for a respite, and I hadn't realized it. Now this goal against us had sapped their last ounce of strength and resolution. Bert Appleby and Steve Smith were supporting each other, propped back to back. Terry's brother Tony was leaning forward with his hands on his knees and a greenish tinge in his cheeks.

I could have kicked myself for being raw enough to expect anything else. A week's friendly kick-about is no kind of training for a match against an eleven at

the peak of fitness and with years of experience behind them. No plan can work if your team's legs go flabby on them.

And that was what had happened to the Comets. Even playing a defensive game and letting Horsley do all the dashing about, the Comets had run themselves into the ground. There was nothing we could do now but pack the goal-mouth and try to keep Horsley from increasing their score before the final whistle.

We succeeded. How we succeeded I don't know, because for the last five minutes there was almost a queue to lean against the goal-posts. Maybe Horsley just didn't bother. I didn't stop to work that out, for the moment the whistle went, I had too much on my mind. The referee beckoned me across. "You're Tom Faraday, aren't you? The boy in charge of this team? Well, I'm sorry about this, but I've been told to give you a warning if you lads didn't put up a good showing today."

"A warning? What about?"

"From the County League. There've been complaints from the other teams who've played against the Woodside Comets this season. They say the game isn't worth playing." He put his hand on my shoulder. "Now I'm saying this in the hope you can do something about it. The League are willing to give you one more try—in next Saturday's game. If you don't do better then, they're going to suspend you. There are three good clubs waiting for admission; Roxhall, Felby, and Hambleton Juniors. One of them would be invited to take over your fixtures for the rest of the season."

"But——"

"I know. It's tough. But you *have* got another week before the axe falls. See what you can do. And now get changed at the double—you look cold!"

Maybe I was white, but it wasn't from cold.

Chapter Eight

TOUGHER AND GRIMMER

ONE WEEK!

I waited until we'd ridden home before I broke the news. It had been a nightmare journey for most of the team; they barely had strength left to move the pedals along the flat, and there was a loud groan from Steve Smith whenever a hill came in sight.

There was a long silence after I told them. We were in the lane outside my house, leaning on our bikes, and nobody said a word for a full minute. The first to speak was Bert Appleby.

"But surely they can't *do* that?"

"Stick around for a week and you'll see 'em do it!"

"It all depends on Joe, now," said Archie Mulloy quietly, looking at Mary.

"I'll go up this evening and see how he is," she said, and gave a brisk smile to everybody. "Come on, snap out of it! Joe will be all right by Saturday, and we'll romp home easy winners!"

Joe *had* to be all right. That was what kept thumping away in my brain later on as I sat by myself in front of the fire. Mary had promised to call in on her way back.

She came at about eight, and I think I knew the

worst when I saw her face in the light of the street lamp.

"Come on in."

"No, I mustn't stop. The doctor's been in to see him."

"And . . . ?"

"And it's no more soccer for Joe. It's his asthma. Look, Tommy, we'll have to talk about it tomorrow—I can't stop. See you at the field after school."

Now the skies were really falling! Trouble was dropping in like thunderbolts—and there was more in store before I went to bed. Dad came in and button-holed me.

I have to admit it—Dad and I hadn't always seen eye to eye. Don't get the idea we were enemies, but let's say there were more things we disagreed than agreed about.

But money wasn't one of them. If there was any one thing that scared the daylights out of both of us equally, it was money trouble.

Dad looked like a man who'd had a nasty shock.

"What's all this about you owing money?" he thundered.

I thought of J. McTurk Stewart, and various other outstanding accounts in the red-ink column of the Comets' cash-book. "Who was it, Dad? Who told you?"

"Then you *do* owe money? Tom, you young fool, where d'you think we're going to find it?"

I think I felt closer to him at that moment than for years. "There's no *we* about it, Dad! But thanks all the same. No, it's a debt owed by the Comets. Who told you?"

"The man himself. Something about a machine for

marking-out lines. I couldn't make head or tail out of what he was talking about."

I explained. And as I did so I realized it meant yet one more blow to put in front of the Comets in the space of twenty-four hours.

Would the Comets stand up to it?

The original Comets had crumpled up in the face of misfortune—melted away leaving me with nothing but the debts to pay. And they had been experienced players who'd been together as a team for a long time. The new Comets had hardly had time to get to know each other. Would the same thing happen all over again?

I couldn't even begin to guess.

I still couldn't guess when the following afternoon they stood facing me in a group by the goal-posts, which had just been put up. The words stuck in my throat; every one of them had worked like a galley-slave, yet now for want of a few pounds, and also a week or two of intensive training, it looked certain that the Comets were finally doomed.

Could the money wait until after the week-end? Would the Hon. Joe's scheme for Sunday raise enough to meet the debts?

"Come on, Tom," Mary urged me. "Let them know the worst!"

"All right," I said. "This is where we stand. We have a ground half-completed, as you know, and we owe ten pounds. If we can't pay, we lose our marking machine and we can't mark out the ground. And if we lose next Saturday, we won't be in the League any longer, so we shan't *need* the ground."

"Well, don't be so darned gloomy about it," grinned Archie. "The Hon. Joe will fix everything for us on Saturday. He'll get ten goals."

I exchanged a glance with Mary.

"That's the biggest part of the trouble," I went on, and explained about Joe. "Now you know the worst. That's the full list of kicks in the teeth for this week."

"Sorry!" The voice came from behind Mary. "Sorry, Tom, but it isn't!" Terry Corrigan moved forward. "Tony and I can't play. It's just as I warned you in the very beginning—Mum thinks we're both sickly weaklings, and she thinks we'll both collapse or something."

There were shouts of derision, which brought out Mary's quick temper. "Shut up!" she shouted. "Don't moan at Terry. It's not his fault. I don't know about you, but I follow what *my* Mum says, right or wrong. Terry's doing the same, and just because he knows she's wrong doesn't give you the right to take the mickey out of him."

"But what do we do about Saturday?" demanded Bert Appleby. "Even with Harry, we're still two men short."

"I'll find two," said Charlie Maggs grimly. "Two of the old team—even if I have to kick their backsides all the way to the field!"

Archie Mulloy spoke up thoughtfully. "When I told you not to be gloomy, Tom, I didn't know about the Hon. Joe. Now it's my turn to be pessimistic. Without him, I'm not sure it's worth playing. We'll just get beaten again. We know that already. So why bother?"

"He's right," said Bert. "What's the use of turning out just to be laughed at?"

There was a chorus of agreement. I saw the look of fury in Mary Naughton's face again, and raised my voice hurriedly.

"Stow it a minute! Let's think carefully before we just chuck our hands in. What lost us last Saturday's game? We weren't too bad on tactics—it was simply that most of us couldn't last out ninety minutes. So let's see what we can do about that between now and Saturday."

"How?"

I scowled. "Tough training! *Real* training. Cross-country running until our legs are nearly falling off. Boxing in the evenings. And tactical training down here at the ground every afternoon." Then a brainwave hit me. "The Hon. Joe can't play, but I don't see why he can't teach. We'll get him down here, and see if he can pass on his tactics to somebody else."

That's the way the Comets launched into a week of sweat and blisters that at first seemed utterly hopeless. Tuesday morning's run looked like a picture of the French aristocrats tottering to the guillotine, but by Wednesday there were six of us who could keep going for at least two miles without blowing like whales, and the others were showing a gradual improvement. Charlie Maggs hadn't brought in his recruits yet, but he had a corking black eye to prove that he'd tried.

Thursday was fine, sunny, and warm. In the intervals between school, training, food, and sleep, I'd been trying to carry out the Hon. Joe's instructions about Sunday, but most of them I'd had to shovel on to Mary's shoulders. Some of them had been fairly complicated; there'd been

a nightmare page of sketches, measured and ruled, to show things which had to be made for an obstacle-golf competition. Mary had taken one look at it, shuddered, and then smiled grimly.

"Harry's the boy for that! Ever since he made Dad a pipe-rack I've heard nothing except how hot he is at carpentry. Well, now's his chance to prove it."

He had proved it. When I went round to see Mary on Thursday evening she pointed to an old tea-chest standing in the corner of the hall. "We've got to take that up to the Randalls on the handcart. It's full of golf-obstacles, and it weighs a ton."

Half an hour later we pushed the handcart through the Randall gates, on our way to see the Hon. Joe and report progress.

We found him just inside the gates, standing on a ladder with his mouth full of nails.

"I'b 'ooting up a ted be'weed der subberhouses," he said, holding on to a length of timber scaffolding and waving the hammer wildly with his other hand. The nails wobbled in his mouth as he spoke.

"*What* did you say?"

The Hon. Joe blinked. Then he jammed the hammer under one arm, removed the nails, and repeated it. "I'm putting up a tent between the summer-houses. Can't rely on the weather, you know. May have to shift everything indoors at the last moment." He peered at the scaffolding, then pulled out his magnifying glass. "I say, this timber's simply rotten with woodworm."

"D'you think it'll hold?"

"It'll have to. We haven't any more." He thumped in a nail, then climbed down.

"We've put up posters all over the village," said Mary.

"Good. I've got six competitions arranged, and the Vicar is fixing up a jumble stall."

"Good for the Vicar. I've got fifty cups and a tea-urn. Joe, d'you really believe we'll get ten pounds out of all this?"

"Oh, at least," said Joe airily. "I've made two hundred tickets at a shilling each. There's a pound prize for the one with the winning number, so that still leaves nine. Then there'll be the money from the competitions and the jumble stall."

I felt lightheaded with high finance, but then I remembered that it wasn't going to do anything except pay off the immediate debts unless the Comets could win on Saturday.

"I suppose," I began hesitantly, "I suppose the doctor wouldn't let you play just *once*—this Saturday?"

"I tried that, and nearly got myself told I mustn't even go down to the field to help train the others. No, Tom, the Doc is right. It'll have to be no football for me."

So the prospect for Saturday remained bleak. There were still no recruits from Charlie Maggs to replace the Corrigans, and Joe's stand-in was a pessimistic Harry Naughton hardly recovered from his blow in the midriff.

"Let's not kid ourselves," I told Mary on the way home. "We've had it."

I should have known better. Mary blazed up furiously. "We haven't had it until the final whistle on Saturday," she almost shouted. "A lot can happen between now and Saturday!"

A lot did. A tremendous lot did!

Chapter Nine

BUILD-UP FOR CRISIS-SATURDAY

IT BEGAN WITH a loud banging on our front door at eight o'clock on Friday morning, while Dad was shaving and I was getting the breakfast. I nipped along the passage in my slippers, to find Charlie Maggs on the front steps. He looked different, and I wondered why until I spotted that instead of one black eye, he now had two.

"It's no good, Tom," he burst out. "I've been round every one of them—and I can't get any volunteers. We're going to be two men short."

It was fine news to start the day. Thirty hours to go, and a nine-man team.

Half an hour later, on my way down to school, the second blow fell. On the edge of the village green, standing right in my path, was J. McTurk Stewart. I looked wildly from side to side for a way of dodging him, but there was only one path beside the green, fenced off from the grass, and unless I leaped the fence I'd have to face up to him.

He blocked the path. It was clear he'd been waiting for me.

"I've been looking for you for some time, my lad," he said. "What about my money?"

I swallowed hard. "Mr. Stewart, honestly I'm sorry we haven't been able to pay you already. But I expect we'll be able to on Monday. We're having a sort of club fair on Sunday afternoon, and we'll be able to settle up after that."

"Huh!" Turkey Stewart gave a short, grim bark of laughter. "You don't expect folk to go all the way down to that bit of rough meadow of yours on old Appleby's land? You won't even cover expenses, boy. Take my word for it. Much better call it off, and pay me out of the money you have in hand."

"We haven't any money in hand. And the fair won't be down at the field—it's at the Randalls."

Turkey Stewart's eyes goggled. "So you've got old high-and-mighty Randall on your side, eh? Well, don't get the idea that cuts any ice with me. I could buy and sell him any day in the week. Mark what I say; I want my money by Monday, or there's serious trouble in store for the whole pack of you."

I felt like Atlas, with the weight of the world on my back. No Joe, two men short for Saturday, the knowledge that in any case it would probably be our last match, debts to Turkey Stewart, and Mr. Thingummy for the marking machine, and finally a field only just filled in and not yet properly mown. I had the lot.

But then, as I reached the school gates, I blinked with astonishment. Coming in on her bike was Mary. Five yards behind her, in running shorts, were Bert Appleby and the short stumpy figure of Steve Smith, loping along steadily and without any effort at a cracking pace—with

Archie Mulloy three paces in the rear, and then, unbelievably, the Corrigan twins.

"Hey!" I yelled. "What's this?"

They made no reply; merely grinned and waved. A few yards down the lane I saw the rest of the team, moving steadily, rhythmically, looking as fresh as paint and strong as lions.

I fell in beside them; ran up the drive with my school-bag thumping up and down on my shoulders.

Mary rode up as far as the door, then waved, circled in the drive, and went down again on her way to the girls' school.

Bert and Archie reached the door, and then, instead of collapsing in a heap as they'd have done a week ago, grabbed two skipping-ropes and put in a thirty-second burst at high speed on the concrete path.

"Who started all this?" I asked. "Where have you chaps been?"

"Two miles!" grinned Bert. "Two glorious early-in-the-morning miles behind Mary's bike, and not a puff or an aching muscle in the lot of us. Isn't that right, team?"

There was a chorus of agreement.

"But what about you two?" I glanced at the Corrigans. "You're not supposed to——"

Terry Corrigan whooped triumphantly. "We've beaten the veto. Last night we were so fed up about being unable to play that we nagged Mum into taking us to the doctor. She didn't want to, but we went on at her until she gave in. And when we got there we asked the doctor to tell us what was really wrong with us both."

"What did he say?"

Terry Corrigan's face went beetroot-red. "I . . . I can't tell you."

"I will!" said Tony abruptly, then stopped, as if wishing he hadn't spoken. "He said we'd both got a bad case of mother's apron-strings! And our Mum stared at him and said she didn't understand. So he told her what we needed was fresh air and a few black eyes and cut knees, instead of so many piano lessons. Poor Mum—after that she didn't have much choice, and so here we are."

"Honestly, though, Tony," went on Terry. "I really think Mum's happier." He turned to me. "She spent half her time worrying over us. Good grief, you should see the medicine-bottles in our bathroom! By the time we'd had all our morning doses we hardly had any space left for breakfast."

"All that's over," chuckled Tony. "The bottles are empty now."

"Uh?" Terry looked startled.

"I poured them into the hen-food this morning. Maybe we'll get bigger eggs!"

I went into the cloakroom to hang up my raincoat. Perhaps this is it, I thought. We've had it on the chin for so long now, I wouldn't recognize a lucky streak if it stared me in the face. Maybe having a full team for tomorrow is just the start of a run of *good* luck for a change. Moreover, it looked as though it would be not only a full team, but a fit one. The lesson of last Saturday had struck deep—deep enough to create a challenge for Bert Appleby and

Archie Mulloy. And whatever path they chose, the rest would follow.

It was after school that I had my next shock. When I reached the field, there was already a practice session going on round one goal-mouth—a knot of players with Steve Smith in the centre, and beside him the unmistakable thin figure of the Hon. Joe.

I ran towards them. "Don't tell me you're back on the fitness list?" I shouted unbelievingly. "Because if so, we'll——"

"No." The Hon. Joe shook his head. "I came down as I said I would, just to help with the training. And I've found something that'll interest you."

"If it's more of your *Agropyron repens*, it *won't*."

"Oh, no, Tom. It's Steve. Hey, Steve, show him what I mean."

Little Steve Smith rolled his eyes. "Tom, he's crazy! He keeps telling me I could be a first-class forward. He doesn't seem to understand that without my glasses I can't even see the ball properly."

"But you should see what he's like when he keeps his glasses on!" exclaimed Archie. "Steve, do that again. Do what Joe showed you." He bounced the ball at Steve's feet. "Go to it!"

A bright shade of pink crept up Steve's neck and flooded into his cheeks. "Lay off, will you! I can't do it with everybody watching."

"They'll be watching tomorrow, Steve!"

Steve pushed the ball with one foot, then dribbled it away downfield. He hadn't the careless, effortless skill of

the Hon. Joe, but he still moved fast and surefootedly, with the ball always close to his feet.

Then he turned, and I realized what was happening. This was to be a one-man attack, a demonstration staged by the Hon. Joe to show us all that Steve could take over in the forward line.

The group round the goal-mouth fanned out to take up defensive positions just in time. Archie Mulloy moved forward, attempted to hook the ball off Steve Smith's boot, and missed by a full two feet as Steve swerved sharply to the left and headed straight towards me.

I rushed him, expecting to find him an easy opponent, as he'd always been with his glasses off, but he deceived me completely with a left swerve, and a back heel which spun the ball to the right. He was on it again in a flash, past me, and moving across to avoid Bert Appleby just outside the penalty area.

Then it came. A beautiful low shot into the corner of the net, made a fraction of a second before Bert and Archie Mulloy were able to intercept, and a fraction before Charlie Maggs in the goal-mouth was expecting it.

"There you are!" said the Hon. Joe calmly, looking through his magnifying glass at a centipede in the palm of his hand. "Curious, these things. Disappointing—it's only got about thirty legs. Well, what d'you think of Steve?"

I paused. It had been a good one-man attack, and there'd been a couple of flashes of quick thinking in it. But it hadn't been in Joe's class at all. I glanced at Steve Smith.

"Well, Tom?" Joe went on.

I grinned at them. "Steve, you're a marvel! Play like that tomorrow, and we've got a chance. We'll use you at inside-right. Joe, can you teach him a few more tricks this evening?"

"I think so. And perhaps again tomorrow morning." Joe led Steve Smith away to the far end of the field with a practice ball.

What we did at our end, I don't remember. My mind was already racing ahead to Saturday.

After the practice, Bert Appleby said, "Come on up to the farm for a cup of tea. Then you can all leave your gear there for tomorrow—save the trouble of lugging it all home and back again."

That made sense. The farm was on the route for Shelby, where we were meeting the Shelby Tigers on a ground which, if I remembered rightly, was as bad if not worse than our own.

The farm-house was empty. "Dad and Mother are at a cattle market," explained Bert. "Light the fire, Tom, while I get the kettle on."

The room was soon warm and cheerful. We drank mugs of scalding hot tea, and boasted of the goals we were going to get against Shelby Tigers. By the time we left, I'd almost begun to believe it myself—that we were the stronger and tougher team, and that we'd spend the afternoon running rings round the Tigers.

We piled our soccer gear into an empty kitchen cupboard. "See you all about one o'clock," said Bert, then added, "unless any of you feel like coming up earlier for

a spot of practice. I can't—I've got to work on the tractor."

We rode home, a long line of cycle lamps like fireflies in the darkness. Behind me I heard raucous singing from Charlie Maggs and the Corrigan twins.

Twenty hours to the kick-off! Time was narrowing down fast, but in place of the despondent feeling I'd had all week, there was now at least a flicker of hope. Even the weakest Comets seemed to have picked up experience and stamina in the past week. Passing had improved out of all recognition; most of all, the forwards seemed to understand the *theory* of successful passing, and the art of unsettling the defence by rapid changes in the attack without any great loss of speed. Sure, it was still largely kick-and-run soccer that the Comets were playing, but kick-and-run soccer has often defeated opponents far more skilled.

A great deal hung on Steve Smith. Was this evening's performance simply a flash in the pan, or would he keep it up throughout the full ninety minutes of a match? How many tricks of ball-play had Joe been able to teach him in the short time available?

I fell asleep early, and as heavily as if I'd been chloroformed.

When I woke up it was already showing signs of being an ideal day for soccer. It was cool but sunny, and the dew was already drying out of the grass. I went with Dad on a quick round of the shops, then set out for the Appleby farm, with a packet of sandwiches for lunch. I reckoned that half an hour's work-out, followed by the six-mile ride

to Shelby, should just about limber me up the right amount for the match.

Bert was hammering away at some portion of the tractor's insides. I waved to him and knocked on the back door.

Bert's mother let me in. I changed, dragged on my right boot, and rummaged in the cupboard for the other.

It was strange—I could have sworn I'd knotted the laces together as I always did, to avoid getting my boots muddled up with others.

No left boot! Puzzled, I dragged everything out of the cupboard—but the boot wasn't there.

And then, as I bundled it all back, I made an alarming discovery! Mine wasn't the only left boot missing. Steve's was missing too, and so was Harry's.

I shoved one shoe back on, and ran to the open window. "Hey, Bert!"

He looked up. "Can't stop now. You'll have to go down without me."

"It's not that. It's my boots. One of them's missing."

"Use your eyes, chum! They're all in that cupboard where you put them last night. It's a whacking great cupboard, and black as a cave at the back. Probably it's hidden under the bottom shelf."

"It's not. I've had everything out of the cupboard. There are three left boots missing."

Bert heaved a sigh, glanced into the engine of the tractor, and wiped his hands on an oily rag. Then he swung himself down to the ground and went to the back door.

A moment later he joined me. "Mum says she hasn't touched anything in that cupboard, so they must still be in there somewhere. Let's get the whole lot out again."

"But——"

"Come on, chum, you haven't looked properly!"

I knew I had, but it was Bert's cupboard, not mine. Maybe there was a tunnel at the back, or something. I reached in and heaved at the pile of shirts, shorts, and boots.

"There you are! Three left boots missing."

Bert Appleby scratched his head. "I can't understand it." His face brightened. "You must have taken them home with you. That's it!"

"Who'd be such a lunatic as to set off home with three left boots? Two, maybe, by mistake, but not three."

"Then what can have happened? Surely nobody would have pinched them?"

I shook my head. "Hardly. If I needed a pair of soccer boots, I wouldn't be likely to run off with three left ones, would I?"

We knelt in the litter of clothing.

"Who's been in here since last night?" I asked.

"Uh? Oh, I see. Well, my Mum, for one. Only she doesn't play soccer, and she hasn't got three left feet. That's the lot, I think—except for my cousin Bill. He was in here for a couple of minutes this morning. But he already had his own boots with him."

"Well, he wouldn't exactly be going round in his socks in this weather."

"His soccer boots, I mean. He was on his way for a

match over at Steepleholme, and dropped in for a chat about half an hour before you came."

"Mmm!" Parents who didn't play, and a cousin who'd already got his own boots. It didn't look promising for any attempts at playing Sherlock Holmes. Not that I'd ever tried before.

"This cousin of yours. What did he do?"

"Oh, nothing. He's just a drip. He'd forgotten his shin-guards, and wanted to borrow an old pair of mine. They weren't in here; I found them up in my bedroom." He grinned. "They won't be much use—all covered with mildew, and the bones seemed to have gone soft. I reckon they haven't been used for about five years."

I frowned at the floor. "So he was on his own in here while you went upstairs?"

"Yeah! Sure he was. But... Hey, Tom, you don't seriously think...? I tell you he already had his own boots tied to the handlebars of his bike."

"He was going to Steepleholme, you say? What team does he play for?"

"Oh, some tuppeny outfit called Hambleton Juniors. He's skipper."

I shot upright: "*Hambleton Juniors!*" I repeated, wondering where I'd heard the name before—yet positive I had, and recently at that.

And then I knew. Hambleton Juniors had been one of the teams the referee had mentioned last Saturday when passing on the threat about the Comets. They were one of the clubs which hoped to take over our place in the League.

"Come on!" I shouted, scrambling to my feet. "Get your bike! I know where those boots are."

Bert's eyes goggled, but he followed me into the yard and ran for his bike. Then, as we swerved and zigzagged down the farm road he panted, "What's the idea?"

I told him. "You said your cousin Bill is a drip? Well, he's *worse* than a drip. I think he's pinched our boots! That's one safe and sure way of making us lose this afternoon, and getting us out of the League. Then his club gets a chance to take over our matches."

"The rotten little . . . D'you think we can catch up with him? He's had about thirty minutes' start."

"I doubt if he expects there's anybody on his tail."

We didn't talk after that—just pedalled steadily, shifting gears and sweating our way up hills we guessed Bill would have taken on foot, then cracking on the pace along the level.

It was a road I hardly knew. All I remembered from the map was that Steepleholme lay about twelve miles to the north. My watch said eleven o'clock, and even at a leisurely pace he must have gone a long way by now.

We rode as fast as we dared along the winding country road, in single file, taking it in turns to lead and set the pace. Neither of us had racing bikes; both machines were ordinary heavy roadsters, comfortable enough for a day's outing, but exhausting for a job such as this.

I heard Bert's heavy breathing, and in spite of the cold he wiped his forehead every two or three hundred yards. The wind cut sharply through the bare hedges and chilled my fingers so that I could hardly feel the handlebars.

What a rotten, underhanded trick Bert's cousin had played! It would be bad enough if the Comets lost their place in the League through defeat—but ten times worse through default, when we weren't in any way to blame. The Hambleton Juniors' skipper must have reckoned on at least three hours going by before anyone discovered what had happened. By then it would have been too late to do anything, and all he'd have had to do would be smuggle the boots back into the farm on his way home again.

It was a slick, smooth, almost foolproof way of finishing off the Comets, and only the sheer luck that I'd gone out early to the farm had given us a faint chance of wrecking the scheme.

"Steepleholme six miles", said a signpost. So we were half-way there, and no sign of Bill. Several times we'd seen lone cyclists ahead of us in the distance, but they'd turned out to be housewives with shopping-baskets on the handlebars, or boy-scouts laden with big packs of equipment.

We rode up a long steep hill on a slippery surface of wet leaves from overhanging beech-trees, and coasted round a bend at the summit to face a long, straight descent.

"There he is!" yelled Bert Appleby from just ahead of me.

Far down the road was a tiny figure free-wheeling.

"How d'you know it's him this time?"

"I just *do* know. I've known that little blighter since he was in his push-chair. Come on, we'll catch him yet!"

But we got only half-way down the slope before some

kind of sixth sense must have prompted Bert's cousin to glance back over his shoulder. Immediately we saw his legs begin pumping up and down, and his bike sway from side to side as he rose from the saddle for extra acceleration.

The cold wind lashed our faces, and cut through our jerseys as we pushed up our speed and pedalled frenziedly down the hill. The small figure ahead increased slightly in size; resolved into a ginger-haired boy in a bright red soccer shirt and white shorts, with a bulging saddle-bag that—if my guess was right—contained five boots instead of two.

The road swerved away to the left after a notice saying "Double Bend". Bert took the curve at an alarming angle, his rear tyre skidding on the loose gravel at the side of the road. I slowed down a little, not trusting myself at this particular brand of acrobatics—and it was that which gave us our lucky break. Glancing to my left, I saw a rough track leading away through the woods, and far along it, a flash of red.

I jingled my bell as a sign to Bert, then swung the bike on to a ridge of rough grass between grooves cut by cars and tractors. Keeping on the bike was like riding in a rodeo; the wheels leaped wildly, skidded on loose boulders; the pedals grazed the ground as the front wheel plunged into deep potholes.

When I reached a twenty-yard stretch of level ground I looked over my shoulder. There was no sign of Bert. I swung my head round in time to see the back wheel of Bill's bike go round the next bend.

And then I too was round that bend, braking sharply to avoid the fallen bike and the flailing fists of Bert's cousin as he clambered to his feet.

I threw my bike to one side, and took a hard blow on the side of the jaw from broken and gritty knuckles that drew blood. For a second it dazed me; long enough for a rain of blows to follow, sending me over backwards into a thick patch of briar. I scrambled out of it, but not quickly enough. Bill was back on his bike, pedalling farther up the track.

I grabbed my own bike and followed. Bill drew away—and then I laughed outright! For ahead of him was a five-barred gate with a padlock on it!

He wrestled with the padlock desperately, then turned to face me.

I got off the bike slowly, laid it on the grass, and moved towards him.

Boxing has never been one of my strong points. By the way he put up his fists, it looked as though it *was* one of his. So it seemed this was to be a bout of skill and desperation against justifiable anger. Luckily I had the sense to remember that an angry fighter is as good as beaten before he starts.

A quick jab I never even saw caught me on the nose. I reeled back, unable to see for a moment, and my foot caught in an outstretched root. Before I could recover, Bert's cousin sent in a rain of hard lefts and rights, and I'd have gone down but for the sheer luck that he tripped on the same root and sprawled on his face.

I stood back. He was on his feet in only about two

seconds, but that was long enough for my head to clear and for me to regain my balance.

As he attacked again, I feinted with my left and caught him a hard jab in the ribs that jarred the knuckles of my right hand. He grunted; swung wildly with his right, missing completely, and gave me a split second's view of an undefended target. I drove hard with my left. It seemed to strike solid rock, so hard was his jaw, but there was no doubt about the result; he staggered backwards, glassy-eyed, and sat down suddenly on the ground, staring over my shoulder into space.

"What a beautiful sight! That's something which has needed doing for years!"

I jumped. Bert had arrived, and moved up close behind me without being seen or heard.

"I'm sorry," I said. "I didn't want to have——"

"I'm not kidding, Tommy. It's just what he needed." He glanced down at the dazed face of his cousin. "As for you, Bill, we'll be glad to see you at the farm again any time you care to come crawling through the yard on your hands and knees with a note of apology between your teeth. Until you choose to do that, you'd best keep away. Well away—because if I catch you within two miles of Woodside village, mark my words, I'll tie you in a reef knot." His lip curled. "If that's the only way your club can find to get into the League, then I think they deserve to stay out. And this afternoon we'll see they *do* stay out!"

He turned back to me. "Come on, Tommy, let's get those boots and be on our way."

We leaped on to our bikes, and struggled back along

the rutted track to the main road, leaving Bert's cousin still sitting on the ground beside his machine. Bert led the way, bouncing in and out of potholes, picking his way between the boulders and the ridges of mud.

It was now a quarter to one by my watch. An hour and a quarter to the kick-off, and probably no fewer than fifteen miles hard riding across country to Shelby.

At the first village we came to, I phoned Mary. She was just about to leave. I didn't attempt to explain in full; simply told her to pick up our gear at the farm; and that Bert and I would meet the team at the ground just before kick-off—we hoped!

Then we rode as we'd never ridden before. I discovered my nose was bleeding, but the cold wind dried the blood. The boots swung from side to side on my handlebars, and the road raced away beneath the wheels.

We travelled along lanes neither of us knew; through strange villages we'd never seen before, while the miles on the signposts to Shelby dropped slowly, changing from double to single figures.

"What's the time?" gasped Bert as he drew level at a bend.

"A quarter to two. And three miles to go.

We raced through those three miles at breakneck speed; scraped through a level-crossing just as the gates were closing, and then pedalled hard down a long, gentle hill which led to the Shelby ground. As we drew near I saw that both teams were already out on the field; the purple and gold of seven Comets, and the maroon of Shelby in separate groups taking practice shots at goal.

We skidded through the muddy entrance and up to the changing-hut.

"Hurry up, you lads!" warned the referee. "The kick-off's in less than ten minutes."

In the hut were two gloomy Comets, each sitting with one walking-shoe still on. I flung them the missing boots, and began to change.

"What happened? What became of our boots?"

"Skip it!" I shot a hurried glance at Bert. "They just got lost."

"No, Tom," said Bert. "They may as well be told the truth. My young cousin Bill pinched them so we'd lose this match and his club would have a chance to take over our place in the League."

"What a filthy trick! Some one ought to beat him up."

"Someone did. Tommy made him wish he'd never been born."

"Come on," I interrupted. "We'd better get moving."

Chapter Ten

THE SHELBY MATCH

We ran on to the field. I took another look at Bert. He was a little white, and there were streaks of sweat down his cheeks. I wiped my face on the sleeve of my shirt; moved into position at inside-left, with Archie at centre-forward raising a questioning eyebrow towards me as I arrived.

There was a moment's pause while the referee greeted the linesmen—long enough for me to take a good look at the opposition.

The Tigers struck me as heavy in defence, with a quintet of lightweight forwards who'd probably move like greased lightning once they got the ball away. Against a quick-moving, quick-passing attack, last Saturday's spoiling defence would be worse than useless.

This time the Comets would have to play a forcing game, relying on Steve Smith's footwork and the combined efforts of Harry, Archie, and myself in support. Terry Corrigan on the left wing was the weak spot in the attack, through sheer inexperience, but in planning the team I'd placed Bert Appleby at left-half to bolster him up.

A short blast on the whistle, and Archie kicked off; a

hard shot past Steve Smith to Harry at outside-right. Harry kept the ball at his feet long enough to draw the left half-back, then astonishingly he sent a hard diagonal back-pass right across to Bert Appleby at left-half. The pass took Bert by surprise, but he recovered just as the Tigers' inside-right was on him, and pushed the ball forward to me.

I weaved and tacked, to draw the opposing defenders just as Harry had done, then at the last split-second lofted the ball over the head of the Tigers' centre-half to Steve Smith, who'd gone well forward in readiness for it.

He got quickly away, the ball dancing at his feet.

So far so good. Steve was racing in towards the penalty area; Harry coming along fast on the wing in support, and Terry Corrigan well up on the other wing either by instinct or sheer blind chance. I caught Mary's eye as she stood poised on the touch-line shouting encouragement to Steve.

But Steve was now ringed by four Shelby defenders, without any chance of a shot at goal. Desperately he looked to his right, then chipped the ball off the ground in a low arc just over the left-back's head to drop at Harry's feet. As the defence swung towards him, Harry passed, hard and low, to Archie, who was little more than ten feet outside the penalty area, with an open goal facing him.

Above the groans of the Shelby supporters I heard a shrill cry from Mary Naughton.

Archie's foot curved down, well under the ball—too

far under! It rose high into the air and came down behind the goal.

There was a sigh of relief from most of the spectators. Archie looked ruefully at his foot, raised, it and wagged it backwards and forwards. The sigh turned into a laugh.

It was then, as the ball came back for a goal-kick, that I realized an astonishing fact. This would be the first time since the kick-off that a Shelby player had touched the ball!

We fell back in readiness for a long kick downfield, but the ball went only a few feet, to the Shelby centre-half, who began a cautious diagonal move to his right—towards Bert Appleby. I saw Bert look uncertainly at him, concentrating on the ball rather than upon the man who might have it next—the Shelby right-winger, poised on the touch-line with a clear field ahead of him.

I waved him back, but it was too late. The Shelby centre-half passed the ball to the outside-right, and in a split second the Shelby attack was under way at tremendous speed in a series of swift and baffling passes between the winger and the inside-right which neither Bert nor the left-back was able to prevent.

Level with the penalty area, the winger shot the ball right in front of goal. Tony Corrigan, the centre-half, made a leap for it but missed by yards, and the Shelby centre-forward, exactly in position, punted it into the side of the net as Charlie Maggs raced out to meet him.

Shelby almost danced with delight; ran back towards centre with their arms flung round each others' shoulders. And on the touch-line there was a yell of triumph.

It was a bad blow after such an encouraging start. There was just time for a quick word of warning.

"They'll try that once again," I said. "Watch that winger and don't let him get a clear run!"

Archie kicked off with a toe-punt ahead of me—but so strong that it was almost snapped up by the opposing forwards before I could get my foot to it. Beyond Archie, Steve Smith had again raced forward and was momentarily unmarked; I passed to him, getting my foot well underneath the ball and trusting his ability to stop it.

But the ball went too high for Steve. He missed it, and collided headlong with the opposing left-half, who nevertheless got the ball away to his wing before falling.

It was the start of another Shelby attack. But this time there was a tougher proposition in the way—Harry Naughton raced back to intercept, his black hair flying in the wind and his shirt-tail escaping from his shorts. He hooked the ball off the opposing winger's foot, chased it and recovered it just inside touch, and then raced downfield with the ball under such close control that each time he was able to twist past almost without breaking his pace.

The other forwards followed up, in a broad diagonal line across the field; Steve nearest, then Archie, myself, and Terry Corrigan on the far wing. The Shelby fullback bore down on Harry in a clumsy, headlong rush; Harry let him come right up to him, then deftly swung the ball inside to Steve Smith.

It was an open goal. Even with his glasses off, I don't

think Steve could have missed it. He was well on-side when the ball reached him, with two yards farther to go to the penalty area. I saw his short stride lengthen, crossed my fingers, and closed my eyes.

The high-pitched shout of triumph from Mary on the touch-line told me to open them again. For an agonizing moment I couldn't see the ball, and thought it had gone wide, or even over the net.

Then I saw it, in the far left corner, partly hidden by the goalkeeper who lay full-length in the mud after his attempt to punch it away round the post.

One-all! And we were already at least fifteen minutes into the game.

There was no back-slapping. That had always been a Comets tradition. We left the kissing on both cheeks to teams like Shelby—and French generals. But there were broad grins for both Harry and Steve.

And suddenly, as we moved back into position, a curious change seemed to come over the Comets. It was very odd—for I'm almost convinced I saw it happen. One moment we were as we had always been—eleven wildly assorted people in soccer shirts, made up of three of the original side, plus the odds-and-ends in the village; the unpopular, the bespectacled, and the supposed-to-be-unfit. And then, as if in a moment everybody's shoulders had stiffened and chins pushed out an extra inch, we were a team, eleven men welded into a common purpose, each with a clear and accurate idea of what his neighbour would do next.

And as this was happening the Shelby Tigers appeared

in a different light. We saw them now through the eyes of confidence. The Tigers seemed to shrink and lose their stripes; to change from bigger, faster, tougher opponents into nothing more than eleven men who'd just made a really bad defensive blunder.

Was it the goal? Or was it the effect of seeing that other teams than ourselves could make mistakes?

Shelby's centre-forward kicked-off with a sharp, curving pass to his right-wing. The winger took the ball on the inside of his right knee, let it bounce on to his left foot, and prepared to outwit the left-back in a quick dash close to the touch-line.

Terry Corrigan might have helped but he merely stood, undecidedly, on the wing. The winger had a choice to run down the touch-line past the full-back, or to cut inside. He swerved inwards—to find Bert Appleby cutting off the path, which forced him to pass towards the centre of the field.

The pass was unplanned and badly carried out. The ball came midway between the Tigers' centre-forward and Terry's brother Tony. Both dashed at it; the ball spun out to me, and suddenly I was away, with a glorious gap in front of me, the half-backs already outdistanced, and only two men between me and the goal.

"Come on, Tom!" I heard Mary yelling. The ball danced along despite the rough and muddy turf; the goalmouth loomed larger, and out of the corner of my eyes I saw Harry streaking along on the wing in readiness for a pass.

As the defence closed in on me, I slipped the ball out to

Harry, then watched him swerve round the full-back six feet from the corner-flag, and centre the ball right across goal as Archie Mulloy dashed forward to head it in.

But heading was still a bit advanced for Archie. He headed it, though not into goal. The ball went straight up in the air, and by the time it came down there was a circle of mixed-up Comets and Tigers struggling for possession.

The struggle moved nearer the goalmouth. Twice I had the ball, but determined Tigers blocked my shot each time. A hard drive from Archie sent the goalkeeper leaping, but the ball rebounded off the angle of the cross-bar and was collected for a second by the Shelby left half-back.

But only for a second. Steve Smith whipped it away, spun completely round in a curious acrobatic move which deceived everyone into thinking he would pass to the wing, and instead punted the ball hard and low six inches to the right of the goalkeeper's outstretched hand.

Two–one to the Comets! Excitement welled up inside me, even though it was far too early for anything more than hope. And immediately afterwards there was fair warning that the slender lead wasn't going to remain unchallenged, for the Tigers launched a brilliant move down the centre which gave Charlie Maggs three difficult saves almost in as many seconds.

The third of these ended in a corner. We marked the Tigers as closely as we could without climbing inside their shirts. The ball sailed high overhead, and Bert headed it safely away towards midfield.

There followed a bad patch of wild kicking by both sides, without any real attack taking shape.

And then it was half-time.

As we changed over, I looked round the touch-line. There were more people watching than I'd imagined. At least thirty Shelby supporters were gathered outside the changing-hut; a few yards away, on her own, was Mary. Beyond her, almost at the corner-flag, was a burly man in a trilby hat and a red-and-green scarf. He could be either a Shelby supporter or another lone cheerer for the Comets, but if he was one of ours, he was certainly one I'd never seen before.

Then, for one of those ridiculous reasons one can never understand, a horrible certainty crept into me that he was Mr. Thingummy, the man about the marking-machine. I felt almost sure that Shelby had been the town where the machine had been bought. Whatever the outcome of the match, I was convinced that lying in wait for me as soon as it was over was Mr. Thingummy.

In which case, we'd better win. There wouldn't be much heart put into Sunday's fund-raising to settle the bills if by then we'd lost our place in the League.

I took up position for the second half. The sun had gone behind a thick bank of cloud, and it had suddenly grown cold. I saw Archie shiver.

Shelby kicked off with a wild flurry of passes between centre and right-wing. For some reason the outside-right no longer seemed keen to make his spectacular dashes down the touch-line.

When the ball came across for the third time, and the

Tigers hadn't made more than ten yards progress, I had dropped back so far that I got my right foot in the way and deflected the ball upwards so that the centre-forward missed it and it went to Steve Smith, also lying well back and looking as fresh as if the game had just begun. He darted past the left-half and then back-heeled to Archie as the centre-half came for him.

Archie looked quickly round the field, then made a beautiful cross-field pass to Harry, far out on the wing and only just two or three yards from being offside.

Harry gathered the ball on the run, outpacing the full-back to the corner-flag while we moved up in readiness for his centre into the goal-mouth.

He stopped in his tracks and swung round to pass.

Then it happened. He swayed far over to one side, clutched at his waist with both hands, recovered, and stood groggily, ignoring the ball, which was scooped up by the Shelby left-back.

The referee blew his whistle. By then four of us were racing across to Harry to catch him by the arms to support him.

"It's my insides!" he gasped. His face was ashy white, and both hands still clutched at his waist.

The referee arrived. I explained about last week's injury, and that until now it had seemed to have cleared up completely. I must have looked worried, for the referee said, "Don't take it too seriously, boy. These things often give a bit of trouble for several weeks. Get him over to the changing-hut and let him lie down."

I handed Harry over to Mary at the touch-line, and ran

back to position. What rotten luck for Harry—and for the Comets too. Here we were once again, facing the second half with a man short just as we'd had to do on the previous Saturday. Still, we were one goal up this time, and the Comets went on looking like a team, even with only ten men.

The next ten minutes was all Shelby. The ball seldom got beyond the half-way line and most of the time it was in and out of our penalty area with Charlie Maggs flinging himself all over the goal-mouth in a series of brilliant saves, some of which looked almost impossible. Shelby not only knew how to get the ball into range; they were also good finishers. Each one of their forwards was a first-rate marksman, particularly smart at spinning the ball in from a sharp angle when every other man on the field expected a pass. It was a shot such as this which put the scores level again; the Shelby left-winger was almost out by the corner-flag; we moved back expecting a pass that would be almost the same as a corner-kick, but instead he dribbled the ball back two paces and sent in a gem of a curving shot which caught Charlie Maggs in the wrong corner of the net.

I guessed we had about fifteen minutes left before the final whistle. Archie and Steve Smith exchanged significant glances, and Archie's kick-off sent Steve away, darting round the opposing Tigers' left-half and almost reaching the penalty area before the Shelby centre-half kicked the ball away into touch.

The throw-in gained us a little ground, for Shelby were all back in position with a defence as unyielding as granite.

I tried to start a break-through by getting the ball away to the left wing, but Terry was hopelessly unready for the pass, and the Shelby right-back was given a clear run down the field without a man to stop him until almost within shooting distance.

This was a desperate situation. Isolated, far away in the enemy half, Archie, Steve Smith and I watched Bert Appleby lumber towards the Shelby right-back and miss him completely. Another purple and gold Comet shirt came to tackle this attacking full-back but was passed by a lively trick of clever footwork. And now it was an open goal, with Charlie moving out cautiously, poised on his toes to leap in either direction or fling himself on to the ball if the shot was delayed.

It *was* delayed. Suddenly I saw Charlie arch himself forward, leap almost horizontally; the muscles of his legs standing out in huge ridges even at the distance from which I was watching. He gathered the ball in both arms right on the Shelby man's boot, and rolled over, flinging it forward a few yards to Bert, who punted it through the oncoming Tigers towards Archie.

The whistle blew. Archie stamped the ball to a halt.

Charlie Maggs still lay where he'd fallen.

For a moment I couldn't believe it! Worry over Charlie swamped even the realization that now we were down to nine men, with the scores level and probably less than five minutes left before the final whistle.

And rightly or wrongly, the referee gave a penalty against us as soon as Charlie had been helped to his feet. He staggered back into goal, shaking the dizziness out of

his head, but it was clear that unless the ball actually bounced off him, Charlie wasn't going to prevent any more goals in the short while that remained.

I tapped him on the shoulder, motioned him off the field, and decided to put on his jersey for this penalty.

I'd never kept goal in my life, but I'd watched Charlie and a good many others preparing for a penalty. There's a great deal of conflicting opinion amongst goalkeepers about the best way to size up the direction a ball will travel even before the kick is made. What I looked for was the placing of the left foot. It stood to reason that unless the Shelby man came in with a curving run—which would tell me in any case—he'd have to place his left foot well out if the right foot was going to carry the ball over to the left.

At least, that was the way I reckoned it.

But I was wrong—hopelessly wrong! I dived to my right as the kick came, and then saw to my horror that instead it was crashing towards the opposite side of the net.

Then, by a fraction of an inch, we were saved. The ball hit the inside edge of the post, and bounced towards me, a yard in front of the goal-line.

I kicked it, a long low toe-punt which sent the ball forty yards downfield and over the touch-line.

Then I ripped off the jersey and tossed it to Tony Corrigan. By the time the throw-in was taken, I was well up in midfield.

From the throw-in the ball came to me, and I kicked it down to Steve Smith. I followed up, seeing out of the

corner of my eye that Terry Corrigan was already well away on the left wing but with enough sense not to put himself offside if a pass came his way.

Steve was halted by the burly left-half, who raced for the ball, tapped it away—and then suddenly stumbled and fell as he tried to kick it back up to the waiting Shelby forwards.

That stumble was costly. Before he could recover I had pounced on the ball and dashed forward, seeing only two defenders between me and goal.

There was no need and no time for fancy inter-passing at this stage. I took the ball along at top speed by kick-and-run dribbling, fooled the centre-half by a dummy pass to the left wing, and shot just as a second man was upon me.

If I live to be ninety, if I play a hundred times for England and score a hat-trick in six Cup Finals there'll never be a goal that will give me such satisfaction or stay so clear in my mind. The ball rose only slightly, heading straight for the goalkeeper, and then as he came out to meet it, it spun away slightly to the right, just outside the reach of his arms.

I heard a wild cheer from Mary, and saw grinning faces all round me. We ran back upfield as Shelby hurried to get the ball into position, but the Tigers had no chance to level the score again. No sooner had their centre-forward passed to the wing than the whistle went. We'd won! Three–two to Comets—and we'd won not only the match, but a reprieve, the right to stay in the League.

I shook hands with the Shelby skipper.

"What's got into you chaps?" he panted. "We were told it would be a walk-over—that you'd only scored about two goals in the whole season."

I couldn't give him an answer. What *had* got into the Comets? Was it desperation, or the effect of a full week's intensive training?

It had turned cold. "Come on," shouted Bert. "Come back to the farm for tea. Mum will find us all something hot."

It was still fairly light as we climbed on to our bikes. "Hurry up," I shouted. In the distance I saw the man with the trilby hat and scarf. He was walking briskly towards us.

"What's the matter?" asked Bert, fumbling with his saddle-bag.

"I'll tell you later. Quick, come on!"

As we rode away, I saw the man stop in his tracks, pause for an instant, and then start off in a different direction towards a parked car.

"Is there another route back to Woodside?"

"There is for the first five miles. Then it links up with the main road again."

"We'll have to chance that. Where's the turning?"

"A hundred yards ahead we turn sharp left. But what's the idea, Tom? We don't have to run away from anything, do we?"

"Oh, *don't* we! You saw that big fellow with the hat? Well, I think he's the man about the money for the marking machine."

We swung sharply to the left, and bumped down a

narrow lane in the grey light of the late afternoon. No sooner had we done so than I heard the roar of a car accelerating along the road we'd just left.

"All right, everybody," I shouted. "We're safe." Then I explained to them all what had happened.

"Who cares?" demanded Archie. "We can settle up on Monday."

"D'you think he'd believe that? Would you? After being kept waiting so long, that chap won't go away again until he's got the money in his hand. D'you want him to make us go round from house to house so he can tell our families?"

There was no answer to that. But we were safe now. Mary started singing a kind of calypso about the Comets' triumph—one of those West Indian kind-of-songs you make up as you go along, with rough and ready rhymes. Archie added a verse, then Terry Corrigan, then Charlie Maggs, and suddenly we were out on the main road again, on familiar territory, with the Appleby farm only just across the next hilltop. We rode past the bushes above the steep path which led down to our soccer field.

"Hey," said Bert in an urgent whisper, "there's a car parked at the edge of the road."

"It's the one that chap got into," said Archie. "But it's empty now."

We got off our bikes, and Bert went cautiously to the side of the bushes.

"Tom, he's down there. Down there below by the goal-posts!"

I ran to join him. "I told you so! He's after that wretched marking machine."

There was silence while all twelve of us looked down into the deep grey of the valley, at the almost invisible figure moving slowly along the length of the field.

"Come on," said Bert. "I'm frozen stiff. And I want my tea. If he finds it—well, he finds it. There's nothing we can do."

"Bert's right," put in Mary. She was shivering with cold. "Let's head for the farm."

We parked our bikes in the yard where for me the serious business of the day had begun what seemed an incredible time ago, then went into the house in a long file behind Bert.

Mrs. Appleby was in the living-room beside a table laden with cake, thick slices of bread and butter, jam, and teacups. There was a roaring fire from which the heat met us in a wave.

"Hello, everybody," she beamed. "I don't need to ask who won! It's written all over your faces—that and starvation. Sit down and get yourselves warm. Tea won't be a minute."

Poached eggs on toast barely touched the edges of our appetites; we filled up on bread and butter, washed down with cups of strong tea. Then Bert opened the lid of an old piano in the corner of the room and struck a loud chord.

"Mum, would you like to hear the song we've made up?" Then, without waiting for an answer, "It goes like this—with any sing-song tune you like."

The Comets had to play a game
That would regain their football fame,
And help restore the fallen name
Of mighty Woodside Comets.

He thumped his chest, and coughed.

"My verse next," said Mary firmly.

Eleven good men heard the call
And answered it—then one and all
Kept both feet close behind the ball
To win the match for Comets.

"Ha!" shouted Steve Smith, "you wouldn't get far *that* way, Mary. Just you try keeping both feet close behind the ball!"

"You're too fussy! This is only a song, remember. Now let's hear Archie's verse."

Archie put one hand on his forehead dramatically, as though he was about to start reciting Shakespeare.

Now here's a tale of Charlie Maggs
Who kept the goal and . . . *What's that!*

"It's only the doorbell," said Mrs. Appleby. "Why are you all looking so scared?"

"Will you answer it, Mum?" pleaded Bert. "If it's a big chap with a scarf and a trilby hat, get him to go away."

Mrs. Appleby looked from one to the other of us, and

the smile left her face. "Just a minute. I'm not going to do anything of the kind unless somebody tells me why. Are you in some kind of trouble, all of you?"

"Well, Mum . . ."

"Yes? Go on, Bert."

"I'd better explain, Bert," I said. "Mrs. Appleby, there's a man trying to collect two pounds ten from the club. Oh, yes, we owe it all right, but we can't pay until Monday, after we've collected the money tomorrow. He's followed us all the way from the match, and he's been hanging about down at our field. I bet that's him at the door."

"Well, I'd better go and find out," said Mrs. Appleby. She picked up her handbag. "And if it *is* him, don't worry about it. I'll settle the bill out of my housekeeping money, and then you can pay me back on Monday."

She went out into the passage, closing the door behind her.

We waited in silence. Oddly, I noticed Bert's hands were still on the keyboard of the piano, with his fingers still pressing down the last keys he'd touched.

Then the door opened again, and Mrs. Appleby came back into the room.

"I've got rid of him," she said. "It was easy, and he didn't even ask for the money. He simply asked for you, Tommy."

"What did you tell him, Mrs. Appleby?"

"I gave him your address, and he said he'd call tomorrow afternoon." Her eyes twinkled. "I forgot to mention that I knew you'd be out."

"Crikey, thanks!" I gulped. "It'll be all right if I can dodge him until Monday."

We heard a car start up in the distance, and there was a general sigh of relief. "But what I don't understand," said Bert Appleby, "is why he didn't ask for the money."

"Clot!" It was Archie. "Why *should* he have asked your Mum for the money? In fact, I'm puzzled how he even knew somebody in the team lived here."

"Come on," I said to Mary. "He's safely away by now. We'd better be heading for home—tomorrow's another busy day. Thanks for the tea, Mrs. Appleby. It was just what we needed after that match."

"Talking of tomorrow," said Mary, "d'you realize we haven't had the decency to phone old Joe and tell him we've won?"

Clustered round the Applebys' phone, we rang. It was Joe who answered.

"Hello, Joe," said Mary.

We heard a splutter at the other end, and then a rather angry voice. "I should jolly well think so! I've been sitting by this phone for more than an hour waiting to know who won. I suppose they beat us ten–nil?"

There was a general laugh. Mary told Joe the score, and there was a whoop of triumph at the other end of the line.

"That's wonderful. So we're still in business! Can you all be here by one o'clock tomorrow? There's still plenty of work to be done before we open at two."

As I lay awake late that night I still heard the faint sound that had been the last as the remaining Comets rode

away after dropping me off at the front door. It had been another calypso verse—and it had come from Mary.

Then Tommy made the forwards roll
And quickly added to the toll
By banging in the winning goal
That saved the Woodside Comets.

Chapter Eleven

SUNDAY

I LOOKED OUT at the same bright sky as I'd seen when I awoke the previous morning. But today it was even more important that it stayed bright. You can play soccer in a hailstorm, but you don't get a crowd at a fête unless the sun is shining.

On Sundays Dad and I always get up late, and then have a sort of "brunch" which begins as breakfast and ends as a three-course lunch, while we read the Sunday papers and talk over what has happened during the week. It's about the only chance we ever get for talking, because on week-days in the evenings Dad's too tired and I've usually got homework.

"I'll be out all afternoon," I said, in preparation for telling Dad that the man in the trilby hat, the man who'd called before, would be calling again. But Dad cut in by asking, "How did your match go yesterday? Sorry I wasn't in last night when you arrived home; there was a darts match on at the local."

"We won! That means we stay in the League, Dad! And after today we'll be able to settle all our debts. That means no more worries, except how to get in enough training to knock spots off everybody we meet for the rest

of the season." I paused, and then added hesitantly, "Dad, I do wish you weren't so set against my playing soccer for a career. If it means I get pushed into something else, I shall hate every minute of it."

Dad put down the paper and stared a long time at a gravy mark on the table-cloth. "You know *why* I feel the way I do? It's because soccer is a dead-end job, Tom, just like my own. If I go on humping coal-sacks until I'm ninety I'll never get a penny more out of it than I do today. I don't want that happening to you. Things are changing, boy. Don't be stuck in a rut, unable to get ahead."

"But Dad, I don't intend to play soccer all my life! By the time I'm . . . oh, say thirty-five or forty, I'll be past it."

"That's exactly what I mean. And then what will you do?"

"Take up something else, I s'pose."

"But you won't have any training or qualifications." Dad lapsed back into staring at the spot on the table-cloth. Then suddenly he thumped the table with his fist. "No, this is downright stupid! I can't stand in your way if you really want to play soccer for a living."

"*Dad!*"

"But I will make one condition—a condition you've got to understand and carry out honestly."

"Of course I will. What is it?"

"Learn another job at the same time. Learn a skilled trade, so that when you pack up soccer you won't be heaving coal for a living. Is it a deal?"

I hesitated. "It won't be easy, Dad. But it certainly makes sense. It's a deal—that is, if I can ever get good enough for professional soccer."

Dad grinned. "You will. If you stay keen enough, you will."

Soon after that, I set out for the Randalls, and met Mary and Harry on the way, and it wasn't until we'd arrived that the excitement of knowing that Dad and I were no longer at loggerheads about soccer wore off enough for me to remember that I'd never got around to warning him about the marking-machine man.

We heard music long before we reached the gates; loud brassy music from an amplifier hanging somewhere high in the trees. The weather couldn't have been better; there was now that bright autumn sunshine which disguises the cold nip in the air.

"Hello, there!"

"Are we the first, Joe?"

"The first? Huh, Bert Appleby's been here since ten o'clock, and the Corrigans since twelve. I've got a job for you—we need one more out-of-doors game. Can you think of anything?"

"Where's it got to go?"

"Oh, there's plenty of space."

"Then what about a soccer game? We'll put up two poles to act as a narrow goal. Then Harry and I will get a soccer ball, and people can pay threepence for the chance to prevent us from scoring inside—what shall we say? Thirty seconds? If they keep us out, then they win half a crown."

"Crikey!" exclaimed Joe. "We could lose a lot of money that way!"

"Want to bet? I think we'll make a profit. Remember, all these people will be in decent clothes. None of them will want to go down flat on the grass in his Sunday suit."

"Phew!" whistled Harry. "You crafty old blighter!"

We'd only just put the posts in position when Archie arrived, followed by Steve Smith, Charlie Maggs, and the others. Joe had jobs ready for all of them. Charlie was in charge of obstacle golf; Steve was to help on the jumble stall, and Archie was given a roll of tickets and a box to put the money in, then stationed just inside the gate. Mary was already busy with the barrowloads of tea-making equipment she'd brought up from the village during the week.

Sharp at two, the gates were opened wide. Archie stepped into the road, looked up and down, and then shook his head gloomily.

"There isn't a soul in sight!"

"Well, what did you expect?" laughed the Hon. Joe, who'd knocked off work for a minute and was examining a badly-nibbled rhododendron leaf with his magnifying glass. "Did you think they'd be queuing up outside? People never turn up on time for this kind of thing."

But by a quarter past two the first arrivals were handing Archie their shillings. Bert's Mum and Dad came in, followed by Dr. Mulloy, then Mrs. Maggs with what looked like most of the members of the Mothers' Union.

"Come on!" said Joe. "Look out, everybody. We're off!"

And crikey, we *were* off, with a bang! Streams of people poured through the gates. Maybe the reason they'd come was that it was the first time they'd ever had a chance to set foot in the Randall grounds, but that wasn't what mattered. It was the shillings clattering into Archie's tin that counted, the threepenny shots at obstacle golf, Mary's takings at the tea-counter, and the profits on the jumble stall.

Harry and I stationed ourselves in front of the improvised goal-posts, and passed the ball back and forth between us.

"Hey, stop that!" muttered Joe in my ear. "You're doing it much too well! Nobody's going to back themselves against you if you go on like that. Leave the ball alone and just stand there looking weak and feeble."

Harry struck up a weak and feeble attitude that left us limp with laughter. He looked as though all his bones had turned to jelly, and a long red tongue hung loosely out of the corner of his mouth. His eyes rolled.

"Turn it up!" I whispered, hacking his ankle sharply. "We've got a customer."

It was a middle-aged man who moved lightly on his feet and watched the ball keenly. I sized him up as an ex-goalie, and nodded warningly to Harry. But Harry was already cruising in with the ball at his toes, balancing for a shot—and I saw the look of astonishment on his face as the goalkeeper leaped upwards and tapped the ball neatly over the bar.

"Fifteen seconds to go!" yelled the Hon. Joe, studying a watch about the size of a soup-plate.

Harry returned the ball, passed it hurriedly to me, and I did a left-foot feint which fooled the middle-aged man into leaving his move to the right until just too late. The ball was in—with a second to spare.

"Well done, youngster!" called out the goalkeeper.

Harry looked at me with startled eyes. "This is going to be a tough way of making money if they're all like *him*," he spluttered. "Let's pack it up and help Mary with the tea-stall."

"Give it ten minutes and see what happens," I told him.

Reluctantly he shrugged his shoulders—but after ten minutes were up he'd changed his mind completely. We'd had eight easy victims—two of them so hopeless that we'd got the ball past them in the first five seconds. The Hon. Joe rattled the box with the money in. "Two and threepence so far," he said. "In a minute or two we'll be able to afford a losing bet. But don't ease up," he added hurriedly.

We didn't. One or two of those who followed gave us uneasy moments, but by half-past three we had nearly a pound in the kitty. I looked round at the people milling about the stalls and competitions.

And then I saw him! There couldn't be any mistake—it was the same hat and scarf, and the same purposeful walk.

"Harry, look over there!"

Harry stared into the heart of the crowd and failed to spot the man—for the simple reason that he wasn't there any longer. He was walking up to Joe, putting three-

pence into the box, and throwing his overcoat on to a tree stump.

"Crikey!" Harry looked wildly around him for escape.

Well, there was nothing to be done but play out this farce to the bitter end. I ran in from the left, prepared to shoot, then passed suddenly across the goal to Harry, who slammed in a sizzling shot which should have gone through and landed a full twenty yards behind, by Mary's tea-counter.

But it didn't. Almost lazily, the man in the trilby leaned to one side, scooped up the ball in his right hand, and hurled it back towards Harry with tremendous force, hitting him smack in the stomach.

Harry doubled up. My astonishment at the save was forgotten in the immediate worry about whether this would start up Harry's aches and pains again, but he clambered to his feet, grinned shakily, and then passed the ball to me.

I hurriedly made a second shot as Joe called out, "Fifteen seconds!" It was a low one, scarcely more than an inch or so off the ground, and I should have known better after what happened to Harry's attempt. The man in the trilby flicked out one foot, and the ball came cannoning back towards me. By the time I'd recovered it and was moving in for another shot, Joe was waving and shouting that time was up.

Joe's eyebrows went up, but he fished half a crown out of the box and handed it to the man in the trilby.

Then to our horror he waved it away. "Let's settle up

afterwards!" he said loudly. "I'd like a few more shots at this!"

I took the ball back, beckoned Harry towards me, and whispered hurriedly. Harry nodded, dribbled the ball away and swung in from the right wing, while I walked slowly towards the goal as if I wasn't taking any part in the whole affair.

Then at the last second, Harry hooked the ball back to me, and I shot harder than I believe I'd ever done before.

I also had the ball back in my chest harder than ever before!

We lost again.

And again.

When we'd lost six times in a row, and Joe was looking sadly into the almost empty tin, I reached the point at which my temper boiled over. If you're an adult, and a smart goalkeeper, you don't go to a show like this one to build up your own bank balance—not even if you're owed two pounds ten.

I started angrily towards the man in the goal-mouth—and then stopped short. For he was grinning, and holding out his hands with the six half-crowns.

"Here you are, Tom Faraday. Your six half-crowns." He reached into his pocket. "And there's two more for luck."

I stared at him. I expect my mouth opened like a goldfish swallowing. "I . . ."

"And I want a word with you in private. Where can we talk?"

"I . . . I know you do. Honestly, we can settle up to-

morrow morning. We're not trying to cheat you—we just didn't have the money until this afternoon."

The man in the trilby raised one eyebrow and looked at me in a most comical way.

"Who on *earth* d'you think I am?"

"Huh?" I blinked at him. "Aren't you the man about the marking machine, then? I was sure you must be, and I've been dodging you ever since yesterday afternoon."

"Marking machine? No, not me! Don't you know these colours, Tom?" He pulled his scarf loose, spread it out with one hand so that the black, green, and yellow diamonds were clearly visible.

"Crikey! That's a Branton Wanderers scarf, isn't it?"

"Of course. My name's Jim Matthews."

"Then you're the manager! But what on earth are you——?"

"What am I doing here? Well, it's a story best told over a cup of tea."

We got our tea at Mary's stall, then leant against the side of a summer-house. "Yesterday I went to watch Shelby. But a man came along and spoke to me. He told me all about the Woodside Comets. He didn't tell me who he was—but he did have plenty to say about the way your lads had worked to get a team together and find a new ground after you'd lost your old one. And so I stopped watching Shelby, and for the rest of the game I watched the Comets instead."

He took a long gulp from his cup of tea, then grinned

at me. "Tommy, how would you like it if Branton Wanderers adopted the Comets—as a junior nursery team?"

"Gosh!"

"We'd give you ten pounds a year to help with expenses, and also a share of our old soccer gear."

"Crikey, Mr. Matthews, that would *really* give us something to play for."

"Then is it a deal?"

"*Is it a deal?* Hey, Harry, Bert, Archie, Mary, come over here a minute!"

The noise that followed drowned the music from the loudspeaker in the trees. And the voice of the Hon. Joe interrupted the music. Through a microphone he announced what had happened.

Then I felt a hand on my arm. It was Jim Matthews. "As for you, Tom, I'd like a special word in your ear."

"Sure, Mr. Matthews."

"This afternoon, I called to see you."

"Oh, heck, I'm awfully sorry about that."

"*I'm* not. Because I got a surprise. The man who opened the door was the surprise. He was the man I'd met yesterday—the one who told me all about the Comets!"

"*My Dad?*" My brain whirled. I couldn't believe it—that Dad had made a special journey to Shelby to watch us play.

"Yes. He's quite a character, your Old Man. Just one thing he told me proved that."

"What was it?"

"He said he hadn't missed a Comets' match since you joined!"

"But I've never seen him! Not even once."

"Maybe he didn't want you to. Maybe he was trying to make up his mind about something. We had quite a long talk this afternoon, your Dad and I. Mostly about you. And though at first he was a bit sticky about it, I'm glad to say he's given me permission to sign you on amateur forms for Branton next year. And when you're seventeen—if you're still making progress and you still want to be a pro—then we'll ask you to join the Branton staff!"

I nodded dumbly. I hope I thanked him. If I didn't, then—oh, well, maybe he understood. He must have been through this a dozen times.

But from then on, the day was a daze. I hardly noticed when Joe told me that the fête had brought in nearly thirty pounds, or when Archie came with the news that his father had given him five pounds towards building a changing-hut down at the ground. At some stage of the afternoon, too, Bert Appleby undertook to make a debt-squaring round on his bike during Monday evening, to settle up with Turkey Stewart, the marking-machine man, and anybody else he could find who had a bill outstanding against the Comets.

I hardly noticed when the last of the crowd went home. At one stage I was in a kind of outhouse with Mary, washing and drying dozens of cups in a huge galvanized bowl of hot water, while Bert and Archie staggered past me with the dismantled poles and canvas of a striped marquee. Harry and Steve Smith followed, grunting with the weight of the tea-chest full of golf-obstacles.

Then, much later, when it was dark, I remember eating a huge tea at the Naughtons, and then travelling in the back of someone's car, with Mary and the Corrigan twins wedged in beside me, out to the Appleby farm.

There was more food waiting for us there—more than we'd ever seen in our lives.

"Watch it, everybody!" called out Mary. "Don't forget you've got another match next Saturday!"

"Never mind Saturday," shouted Bert with his mouth full. "If we took on Tottenham Hotspur now, we'd beat 'em."

I felt he was right. I could see forward to next Saturday, and to a dozen Saturdays after it—see the Comets steadily welding themselves together as a team, spurred always by the knowledge that after what they'd been through already, nothing in the world was impossible. It was really too late in the season to hope we could win the Championship—but by golly we'd have a shot at it!

And then, above the noise of a wild but friendly argument between Harry and the Corrigan twins, I heard the doorbell ring. I was nearest; I looked questioningly at Mrs. Appleby across the room.

"Answer it, Tommy, there's a dear."

I went down the passage and opened the door. At first I couldn't see anyone in the darkness. Then I heard a scuffling sound, and glanced down.

I laughed—a great relaxed roaring laugh that brought half a dozen Comets racing down the corridor.

"Hey, Bert, look at this!"

There, kneeling on the ground at the doorstep with a sheet of paper between its teeth, was a muddy, shivering figure. It was the last remaining link to complete the Comets' story.

Bert's cousin Bill had come to make his peace!

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